MY FRIEND PROSPERO

By the Author of

THE CARDINAL'S SNUFF-BOX

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MY FRIEND PROSPERO

By the Same Author:

THE CARDINAL'S SNUFF-BOX.
Illustrated by G. C. Wilmshurst.
One Hundred and Fifth Thousand.

THE LADY PARAMOUNT.
Fifty-fifth Thousand.

COMEDIES AND ERRORS.
Third Edition.

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MY FRIEND PROSPERO

By HENRY HARLAND

Author of

"THE CARDINAL'S SNUFF-BOX"

JOHN LANE: THE BODLEY HEAD

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PART FIRST

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My Friend Prospero

I

The coachman drew up his horses before the castle gateway, where their hoofs beat a sort of fanfare on the stone pavement; and the footman, letting himself smartly down, pulled, with a peremptory gesture that was just not quite a swagger, the bronze hand at the end of the dangling bell-cord.

Seated alone in her great high-swung barouche, in the sweet April weather, Lady Blanchemain gave the interval that followed to a consideration of the landscape: first, sleeping in shadowy stillness, the formal Italian garden, its terraced lawns and metrical parterres, its straight dark avenues of ilex, its cypresses, fountains, statues, balustrades; and then, laughing in the breeze and the sun, the wild Italian valley, a forest of blossoming fruit-trees, with the river winding and glinting in

its midst, with olive-clad hills blue-grey at either side, and beyond the hills, peering over their shoulders, the snow-peaks of mountains, crisp against the sky, and in the level distance the hazy shimmer of the lake.

"It is lovely," she exclaimed, fervently, in a whisper, "lovely.—And only a generation of blind-worms," was her after-thought, "could discern in it the slightest resemblance to the drop-scene of a theatre."

II

Big, humorous, emotional, imperious, but, above all, interested and sociable Lady Blanchemain: do you know her, I wonder? Her billowy white hair? Her handsome soft old face, with its smooth skin, and the good strong bony structure underneath? Her beautiful old grey eyes, full of tenderness and shrewdness, of curiosity, irony, indulgence, overarched and emphasized by regular black eyebrows? Her pretty little plump pink-white hands, (like two little elderly Cupids), with their shining panoply of rings? And her luxurious, courageous, high-hearted manner of dressing? The light colours and jaunty fashion of her gowns? Her laces, ruffles, embroideries? Her gay little bonnets? Her gems? Linda Baroness Blanchemain, of Fring Place, Sussex; Belmore Gardens, Kensington; and Villa Antonina, San Remo: big, merry, sociable, sentimental,

worldly-wise, impetuous Linda Blanchemain: do you know her? If you do, I am sure you love her and rejoice in her; and enough is said. If you don't, I beg leave to present and to commend her.

I spoke, by the bye, of her "old" face, her "old" eyes. She is, to be sure, in so far as mere numbers of years tell, an old woman. But I once heard her throw out, in the heat of conversation, the phrase, "a young old thing like me;" and I thought she touched a truth.

III

Well, then, the footman, in his masterful way, pulled the bell-cord ; Lady Blanchemain contemplated the landscape, and had her opinion of a generation that could liken it to the drop-scene of a theatre ; and in due process of things the bell was answered.

It was answered by a man in a costume that struck my humorous old friend as pleasing : a sallow little man whose otherwise quite featureless suit of tweeds was embellished by scarlet worsted shoulder-knots. With lack-lustre eyes, from behind the plexus of the grille, he rather stolidly regarded the imposing British equipage, and waited to be addressed.

Lady Blanchemain addressed him in the language of Pistoja. Might one, she inquired, with her air of high affability, in her distinguished old voice, might one visit the castle ? —a question purely of convention, for she had

not come hither without an assurance from her guide-book.

Shoulder-knots, however,—either to flaunt his attainments, or because indeed Pistoiese (what though the polyglot races of Italy have agreed upon it as a lingua franca) offered the greater difficulties to his Lombardian tongue,—replied in French.

"I do not think so, Madame," was his reply, in a French sufficiently heavy and stiff-jointed, enforced by a dubious oscillation of the head.

Lady Blanchemain's black eyebrows shot upwards, marking her surprise; then drew together, marking her determination.

"But of course one can—it's in the guide-book," she insisted, and held up the red-bound volume.

The sceptic gave a shrug, as one who disclaimed responsibility and declined discussion.

"Me, I do not think so. But patience! I will go and ask," he said; and, turning his back, faded from sight in the depths of the dark tunnel-like porte-cochère.

Vexed, perplexed, Lady Blanchemain fidgeted a little. To have taken this long drive for nothing!—sweet though the weather was, fair

though the valley : but she was not a person who could let the means excuse the end. She neither liked nor was accustomed to see her enterprises balked,—to see doors remain closed in her face. Doors indeed had a habit of flying open at her approach. Besides, the fellow's manner,—his initial stare and silence, his tone when he spoke, his shrug, his exhortation to patience, and something too in the conduct of his back as he departed,—hadn't it lacked I don't know what of becoming deference? To satisfy her amour-propre, at any rate, that the mistake, if there was a mistake, sprang from no malapprehension of her own, she looked up chapter and verse. Yes, there the assurance stood, circumstantial, in all the convincingness of the sturdy, small black type :—

"From Roccadoro a charming excursion may be made, up the beautiful Val Rampio, to the mediæval village of Sant' Alessina (7 miles), with its magnificent castle, in fine grounds, formerly a seat of the Sforzas, now belonging to the Prince of Zelt-Neuminster, and containing the celebrated Zelt-Neuminster collection of paintings. Incorporated in the castle-buildings, a noticeable peculiarity, are

the parish church and presbytery. Accessible daily, except Monday, from 10 to 4; attendant 1 fr."

So then! To-day was Wednesday, the hour between two and three. So—! Her amour-propre triumphed, but I fancy her vexation mounted. . . .

IV

"I BEG your pardon. It's disgraceful you should have been made to wait. The porter is an idiot. You wish, of course, to see the house— ?"

The English words, on a key of spontaneous apology, with a very zealous inflection of concern—yet, at the same time, with a kind of entirely respectful and amiable abruptness, as of one hailing a familiar friend,—were pronounced in a breath by a brisk, cheerful, unmistakably English voice.

Lady Blanchemain, whose attention had still been on the incriminated page, looked quickly up, and (English voice and spontaneous apology notwithstanding) I won't vouch that the answer at the tip of her impulsive tongue mightn't have proved a hasty one—but the speaker's appearance gave her pause: the appearance of the tall, smiling, unmistakably English young

man, by whom Shoulder-knots had returned accompanied, and who now, having pushed the grille ajar and issued forth, stood, placing himself with a tentative obeisance at her service, beside the carriage: he was so clearly, first of all—what, if it hadn't been for her preoccupation, his voice, tone, accent would have warned her to expect—so visibly a gentleman; and then, with the even pink of his complexion, his yellowish hair and beard, his alert, friendly, very blue blue eyes—with his very blue blue flannels too, and his brick-red knitted tie—he was so vivid and so unusual.

His appearance gave her a pause; and in the result she in her turn almost apologized.

"This wretched book," she explained, pathetically bringing forward her *pièce justificative*, "said that it was open to the public."

The vivid young man hastened to put her in the right.

"It is—it *is*," he eagerly affirmed. "Only," he added, with a vaguely rueful modulation, and always with that amiable abruptness, as a man very much at his ease, while his blue eyes whimsically brightened, "only the blessed public never comes—we're so off the beaten

path. And I suppose one mustn't expect a Scioccone"—his voice swelled on the word, and he cast sidelong a scathing glance at his summoner—"to cope with unprecedented situations. Will you allow me to help you out?"

"Ah," thought Lady Blanchemain, "Eton," his tone and accent now nicely appraised by an experienced ear. "Eton—yes; and probably —h'm? Probably Balliol," her experience led her further to surmise. But what—with her insatiable curiosity about people, she had of course immediately begun to wonder—what was an Eton and Balliol man doing, apparently in a position of authority, at this remote Italian castle?

V

He helped her out, very gracefully, very gallantly; and under his guidance she made the tour of the vast building: its greater court and lesser court; its cloisters, with their faded frescoes, and their marvellous outlook, northwards, upon the Alps; its immense rotunda, springing to the open dome, where the sky was like an inset plaque of turquoise; its "staircase of honour," guarded, in an ascending file, by statues of men in armour; and then, on the *piano nobile*, its endless chain of big, empty, silent, splendid state apartments, with their pavements of gleaming marble, in many-coloured patterns, their painted and gilded ceilings, tapestried walls, carved wood and moulded stucco, their pictures, pictures, pictures, and their atmosphere of stately desolation, their memories of another age, their reminders of the power and pomp of people who had long been ghosts.

He was tall (with that insatiable curiosity of hers, she was of course continuously studying

him), tall and broad-shouldered, but not a bit rigid or inflexible—of a figure indeed conspicuously supple, suave in its quick movements, soft in its energetic lines, a figure that could with equal thoroughness be lazy in repose and vehement in action. His yellow hair was thick and fine, and if it hadn't been cropped so close would have curled a little. His beard, in small crinkly spirals, did actually curl, and toward the edge its yellow burned to red. And his blue eyes were so very very blue, and so very keen, and so very frank and pleasant—"They are like sailors' eyes," thought Lady Blanchemain, who had a sentiment for sailors. He carried his head well thrown back, as a man who was perfectly sure of himself and perfectly unselfconscious; and thus unconsciously he drew attention to the vigorous sweep of his profile, the decisive angles of his brow and nose. His voice was brisk and cheerful and masculine; and that abruptness with which he spoke—which seemed, as it were, to imply a previous acquaintance—was so tempered by manifest good breeding and so coloured by manifest good will, that it became a positive part and parcel of what one liked in

him. It was the abruptness of a man very much at his ease, very much a man of the world, yet it was somehow, in its essence, boyish. It expressed freshness, sincerity, conviction, a boyish wholesale surrender of himself to the business of the moment; it expressed, perhaps above all, a boyish thorough good understanding with his interlocutor. "It amounts," thought his present interlocutrice, "to a kind of infinitely sublimated bluffness."

And then she fell to examining his clothes: his loose, soft, very blue blue flannels, with vague stripes of darker blue; his soft shirt, with its rolling collar; his red tie, knitted of soft silk, and tied in a loose sailor's-knot. She liked his clothes, and she liked the way he wore them. They suited him. They were loose and comfortable and unconventional, but they were beautifully fresh and well cared for, and showed him, if indifferent to the fashion-plate of the season, meticulous in a fashion of his own. "It's hard to imagine him dressed otherwise," she said, and instantly had a vision of him dressed for dinner.

But what—what—what was he doing at Castel Sant' Alessina?

VI

Meanwhile he plainly knew a tremendous lot about Italian art. Lady Blanchemain herself knew a good deal, and could recognize a pundit. He illumined their progress by a running fire of exposition and commentary, learned and discerning, to which she encouragingly listened, and, as occasion required, amiably responded. But Boltraffios, Bernardino Luinis, even a putative Giorgione, could not divert her mind from its human problem. What was he doing at Castel Sant' Alessina, the property, according to her guide-book, of an Austrian prince? What was his status here, apparently (bar servants) in solitary occupation? Was he its tenant? He couldn't, surely, this well-dressed, high-bred, cultivated young compatriot, he couldn't be a mere employé, a steward or curator? No: probably a tenant. Antecedently indeed it might seem unlikely that a young Englishman

should become the tenant of an establishment so huge and so sequestered ; but was it conceivable that this particular young Englishman should be a mere employé ? And was there any other alternative ? She hearkened for a word, a note, that might throw light ; but of such notes, such words, a young man's conversation, in the circumstances, would perhaps naturally yield a meagre crop.

" You mustn't let me tire you," he said presently, as one who had forgotten and suddenly remembered that looking at pictures is exhausting work. " Won't you sit here and rest a little ? "

They were in a smaller room than any they had previously traversed, an octagonal room, which a single lofty window filled with sunshine.

" Oh, thank you," said Lady Blanchemain, and seated herself on the circular divan in the centre of the polished terrazza floor. She wasn't really tired in the least, the indefatigable old sight-seer ; but a respite from picture-gazing would enable her to turn the talk. She put up her mother-of-pearl lorgnon, and glanced round the walls ; then, lowering it, she frankly

raised her eyes, full of curiosity and kindness, to her companion's.

"It's a surprise, and a delightful one," she remarked, "having pushed so far afield in a foreign land, to be met by the good offices of a fellow-countryman—it's so nice of you to be English."

And her eyes softly changed, their curiosity being veiled by a kind of humorous content.

The young man's face, from its altitude of six-feet-something, beamed responsively down upon her.

"Oh," he laughed, "you mustn't give me too much credit. To be English nowadays is so ingloriously easy—since foreign lands have become merely the wider suburbs of London."

Lady Blanchemain's eyes lighted approvingly. Afterwards she looked half serious.

"True," she discriminated, "London has spread pretty well over the whole of Europe; but England, thanks be to goodness, still remains mercifully small."

"Yes," agreed the young man, though with a lilt of dubiety, and a frown of excogitation, as if he weren't sure that he had quite caught her drift.

"The mercy of it is," she smilingly pointed out, "that English folk, decent ones, have no need to fight shy of each other when they meet as strangers. We all know more or less about each other by hearsay, or about each other's people; and we're all pretty sure to have some common acquaintances. The smallness of England makes for sociability and confidence."

"It ought to, one would think," the young man admitted. "But does it, in fact? It had somehow got stuck in my head that English folk, meeting as strangers, were rather apt to glare. We're most of us in such a funk, you see, lest, if we treat a stranger with civility, he should turn out not to be a duke."

"Oh," cried Lady Blanchemain, with merriment, "you forget that I said *decent*. I meant, of course, folk who *are* dukes. We're all dukes—or bagmen."

The young man chuckled; but in a minute he pulled a long face, and made big, ominous eyes.

"I feel I ought to warn you," he said in a portentous voice, "that some of us are mere marquises—of the house of Carabas."

Lady Blanchemain, her whole expansive person, simmered with enjoyment.

"Bless you," she cried, "those are the ducalest, for marquises—of the house of Carabas—are men of dash and spirit, born to bear everything before them, and to marry the King's daughter."

With that, she had a moment of abstraction. Again, her eyeglass up, she glanced round the walls—hung, in this octagonal room, with dim-coloured portraits of women, all in wonderful toilets, with wonderful hair and head-gear, all wonderfully young and pleased with things, and all four centuries dead. They caused her a little feeling of uneasiness, they were so dead and silent, and yet somehow, in their fixed postures, with their unblinking eyes, their unvarying smiles, so—as it seemed to her—so watchful, so intent; and it was a relief to turn from them to the window, to the picture framed by the window of warm, breathing, heedless nature. But all the while, in her interior mind, she was busy with the man before her. "He looks," she considered, "tall as he is, and with his radiant blondeur—with the gold in his hair and beard, and the sea-blue in his

eyes—he looks like a hero out of some old Norse saga. He looks like—what's his name? —like Odin. I must really compel him to explain himself."

It very well may be, meantime, that he was reciprocally busy with her, taking her in, admiring her, this big, jolly, comely, high-mannered old woman, all in soft silks and drooping laces, who had driven into his solitude from Heaven knew where, and was quite unquestionably Someone, Heaven knew who.

She had a moment of abstraction; but now, emerging from it, she used her eyeglass as a pointer, and indicatively swept the circle of painted eavesdroppers.

"They make one feel like their grandmother, their youth is so flagrant," she sighed, "these grandmothers of the Quattrocento. Ah, well, we can only be old once, and we should take advantage of the privileges of age while we have 'em. Old people, I am thankful to say, are allowed, amongst other things, to be inquisitive. I'm brazenly so. Now, if one of our common acquaintances were at hand—for with England still mercifully small, we're sure to possess a dozen, you and I—what do you

think is the question I should ask him?—I should ask him," she avowed, with a pretty effect of hesitation, and a smile that went as an advance-guard to disarm resentment, "to tell me who you are, and all about you—and to introduce you to me."

"Oh," cried the young man, laughing. He laughed for a second or two. In the end, pleasantly, with a bow, "My name," he said, "if you can possibly care to know, is Blanchemain."

His visitor caught her breath. She sat up straight, and gazed hard at him.

"Blanchemain?" she gasped.

VII

THERE were, to be sure, reasons and to spare why the name should make her sit up straight. Her curiosity had turned the key, and lo, with a click, here was an entirely changed, immensely complicated, intensely poignant situation. But our excitable old friend was an Englishwoman : dissimulation would be her second nature ; you could trust her to pull the wool over your eyes with a fleet and practised hand. Instinctively, furthermore, she would seek to extract from such a situation all the fun it promised. Taken off her guard, for the span of ten heart-beats she sat up straight and stared ; but with the eleventh her attitude relaxed. She had regained her outward nonchalance, and resolved upon her system of fence.

"Ah," she said, on a tone judiciously compounded of feminine artlessness and of forthright British candour, and with a play of the

eyebrows that attributed her momentary suscitation to the workings of memory, "of course—Blanchemain. The Sussex Blanchemains. I expect there's only one family of the name?"

"I've never heard of another," assented the young man.

"The Ventmere Blanchemains," she pursued pensively. "Lord Blanchemain of Ventmere is your titled head?"

"Exactly," said he.

"I knew the late Lord Blanchemain—I knew him fairly well," she mentioned, always with a certain pensiveness.

"Oh—?" said he, politely interested.

"Yes," said she. "But I've never met his successor. The two were not, I believe, on speaking terms. Of course,"—and her forthright British candour carried her trippingly over the delicate ground,—"it's common knowledge that the family is divided against itself—hostile branches—a Protestant branch and a Catholic. The present lord, if I've got it right, is a Catholic, and the late lord's distant cousin?"

"You've got it quite right," the young man assured her, with a nod, and a little laugh.

"They had the same great-great-grandfather. The last few lords have been Protestants, but in our branch the family have never forsaken the old religion."

"I know," said she. "And wasn't it—I've heard the story, but I'm a bit hazy about it—wasn't it owing to your—is 'recusancy' the word?—that you lost the title? Wasn't there some sort of sharp practice at your expense in the last century?"

The young man had another little laugh.

"Oh, nothing," he answered, "that wasn't very much the fashion. The late lord's great-grandfather denounced his elder brother as a Papist and a Jacobite—nothing more than that. It was after the 'Forty-five. So the cadet took the title and estates. But with the death of the late lord, a dozen years or so ago, the younger line became extinct, and the title reverted."

"I see," said my lady. She knitted her eyebrows, computing. After an instant, "General Blanchemain," she resumed, "as the present lord was called for the best part of his life, is a bachelor. You will be one of his nephews?" She raised her eyes inquiringly.

"The son of his brother Philip," said the young man.

Lady Blanchemain sat up straight again.

"But then," she cried, forgetting to conceal her perturbation, "then you're the heir. Philip Blanchemain had but one son, and was the General's immediate junior. You're John Blanchemain—John Francis Joseph Mary. You're the heir."

The young man smiled—at her eagerness, perhaps.

"The heir-presumptive—I suppose I am," he said.

Lady Blanchemain leaned back and gently tittered.

"See how I know my Peerage!" she exclaimed. Then, looking grave, "You're heir to an uncommonly good old title," she informed him.

"I hope it may be many a long day before I'm anything else," said he.

"Your uncle is an old man," she suggestively threw out.

"Oh, not so very old," he submitted. "Only seventy, or thereabouts, and younger in many respects than I am. I hope he'll live for ever."

"Hum!" said she, and appeared to fall a-musing. Absently, as it seemed, and slowly, she was pulling off her gloves.

"Feuds in families," she said, in a minute, "are bad things. Why don't you make it up?"

The young man waved his hand, a pantomimic *non-possumus*.

"There's no one left to make it up with—the others are all dead."

"Oh?" she wondered, her eyebrows elevated, whilst automatically her fingers continued to operate upon her gloves. "I thought the last lord left a widow. I seem to have heard of a *Lady* Blanchemain somewhere."

The young man gave still another of his little laughs.

"Linda Lady Blanchemain?" he said. "Yes, one hears a lot of her. A highly original character, by all accounts. One hears of her everywhere."

Linda Lady Blanchemain's lip began to quiver; but she got it under control.

"Well?" she questioned—eyes fixing his, and brimming with a kind of humorous defiance, as if to say, "Think me an impertinent old

meddler if you will, and do your worst,"—"Why don't you make it up with *her?*"

But he didn't seem to mind the meddling in the least. He stood at ease, and plausibly put his case.

"Why don't I? Or why doesn't my uncle? My uncle is a temperamental conservative, a devotee to his traditions—the sort of man who will never do anything that hasn't been the constant habit of his forebears. He would no more dream of healing a well-established family feud than of selling the family plate. And I—well, surely, it would never be for me to make the advances."

"No, you're right," acknowledged Lady Blanchemain. "The advances should come from her. But people have such a fatal way—even without being temperamental conservatives—of leaving things as they find them. Besides, never having seen you, she couldn't know how nice you are. All the same, I'll confess, if you insist upon it, that she ought to be ashamed of herself. Come—let's make it up."

She rose, a great soft glowing vision of benignancy, and held out her hand, now

gloveless, her pretty little smooth plump right hand, with its twinkling rings.

"Oh!" cried the astonished young man, the astonished, amused, moved, wondering, and entirely won young man, his sea-blue eyes wide open, and a hundred lights of pleasure and surprise dancing in them.

The benignant vision floated towards him, and he took the little white hand in his long lean brown one.

VIII

When the first stress of their emotion had in some degree spent itself, Lady Blanchemain, returning to her place on the ottoman, bade John sit down beside her.

"Now," she said, genially imperative, whilst all manner of kindly and admiring interest shone in her face, "there are exactly nine million and ninety-nine questions that you'll be obliged to answer before I've done with you. But to begin, you must clear up at once a mystery that's been troubling me ever since you dashed to my rescue at the gate. What in the name of Reason is the cause of your residence in this ultramundane stronghold?"

John—convict me of damnable iteration if you must: Heaven has sent me a laughing hero—John laughed.

"Oh," he said, "there are several causes—there are exactly nine million and ninety-eight."

"Name," commanded Lady Blanchemain, "the first and the last."

"Well," obeyed he, pondering, "I should think the first, the last, and perhaps the chief intermediate, would be—the whole blessed thing." And his arm described a circle which comprehended the castle and all within it, and the countryside without.

"It has a pleasant site, I'll not deny," said Lady Blanchemain. "But don't you find it a trifle far away? And a bit up-hill? I'm staying at the Victoria at Roccadoro, and it took me an hour and a half to drive here."

"But since," said John, with a flattering glance, "since you *are* here, I have no further reason to deplore its farawayness. So few places are far away, in these times and climes," he added, on a note of melancholy, as one to whom all climes and times were known.

"Hum!" said Lady Blanchemain, matter-of-fact. "Have you been here long?"

"Let me see," John answered. "To-day is the 23rd of April. I arrived here—I offer the fact for what it may be worth—on the Feast of All Fools."

"*Absit omen*," cried she. "And you intend to stay?"

"Oh, I'm at least wise enough not to fetter myself with intentions," answered John.

She looked about, calculating, estimating.

"I suppose it costs you the very eyes of your head?" she asked.

John giggled.

"Guess what it costs—I give it to you in a thousand."

She continued her survey, brought it to a period.

"A billion a week," she said, with finality.

John exulted.

"It costs me," he told her, "six francs fifty a day—wine included."

"What!" cried she, mistrusting her ears.

"Yes," said he.

"Fudge!" said she, not to be caught with chaff.

"It sounds like a traveller's tale, I know; but that's so often the bother with the truth," said he. "Truth is under no obligation to be *vraisemblable*. I'm here *en pension*."

Lady Blanchemain sniffed.

"Does the Prince of Zelt-Neuminster take

in boarders?" she inquired, her nose in the air.

"Not exactly," said John. "But the Parroco of Sant' Alessina does. I board at the presbytery."

"Oh," said Lady Blanchemain, beginning to see light, while her eyebrows went up, went down. "You board at the presbytery?"

"For six francs fifty a day—wine included," chuckled John.

"Wine, and apparently the unhindered enjoyment of—the whole blessed thing," supplemented she, with a reminder of his comprehensive gesture.

"Yes—the run of the house and garden, the freedom of the hills and valley."

"I understand," she said, and was mute for a space, readjusting her impressions. "I had supposed," she went on at last, "from the handsome way in which you snubbed that creature in shoulder-knots, and proceeded to do the honours of the place, that you were little less than its proprietor."

"Well, and so I could almost feel I am," laughed John. "I'm alone here—there's none my sway to dispute. And as for the creature

in shoulder-knots, what becomes of the rights of man or the bases of civil society, if you can't snub a creature whom you regularly tip? For five francs a week the creature in shoulder-knots cleans my boots (indifferent well), brushes my clothes, runs my errands (indifferent slow),—and swallows my snubs as if they were polenta."

"And tries to shoo intrusive trippers from your threshold—and gets an extra plateful for his pains," laughed the lady. "Where," she asked, "does the Prince of Zelt-Neuminster keep himself?"

"In Vienna, I believe. Anyhow, at a respectful distance. The parroco, who is also his sort of intendant, tells me he practically never comes to Sant' Alessina."

"Good easy man," quoth she. "Yes, I certainly supposed you were his tenant-in-fee, at the least. You have an air." And her bob of the head complimented him upon it.

"Oh, we Marquises of Carabas!" cried John, with a flourish.

She regarded him doubtfully.

"Wouldn't you find yourself in a slightly difficult position, if the Prince or his family should suddenly turn up?" she suggested.

"I? Why?" asked John, his blue eyes blank.

"A young man boarding with the parroco for six francs a day—" she began.

"Six francs fifty, please," he gently interposed.

"Make it seven if you like," her ladyship largely conceded. "Wouldn't your position be slightly false? Would they quite realize who you were?"

"What could that possibly matter?" wondered John, eyes blanker still.

"I could conceive occasions in which it might matter furiously," said she. "Foreigners can't with half an eye distinguish amongst us, as we ourselves can; and Austrians have such oddly exalted notions. You wouldn't like to be mistaken for Mr. Snooks?"

"I don't know," John reflected, vistas opening before him. "It might be rather a lark."

"Whrrr!" said Lady Blanchemain, fanning herself with her pocket-handkerchief. Then she eyed him suspiciously. "You're hiding the nine million other causes up your sleeve. It isn't merely the 'whole blessed thing' that's keeping an eaglet of your feather alone in an

improbable nest like this—it's some one particular thing. In my time," she sighed, "it would have been a woman."

"And no wonder," riposted John, with a flowery bow.

"You're very good—but you confuse the issue," said she. "In my time the world was young and romantic. In this age of prose and prudence—*is* it a woman?"

"The world is still, is always, young and romantic," said John, sententious. "I can't admit that an age of prose and prudence is possible. The poetry of earth is never dead, and no more is its folly. The world is always romantic, if you have the three gifts needful to make it so."

"*Is* it a woman?" repeated Lady Blanchemain.

"And the three gifts are," said he, "Faith, and the sense of Beauty, and the sense of Humour."

"And I should have thought, an attractive member of the opposite sex," said she. "*Is* it a woman?"

"Well," he at last replied, appearing to take counsel with himself, "I don't know why I

should forbid myself the relief of owning up to you that in a sense it is."

"Hurray!" cried she, moving in her seat, agog, as one who scented her pet diversion. "A love affair! I'll be your confidante. Tell me all about it."

"Yes, in a sense, a love affair," he confessed.

"Good—excellent," she approved. "But—but what do you mean by 'in a sense'?"

"Ah," said he, darkly nodding, "I mean whole worlds by that."

"I don't understand," said she, her face prepared to fall.

"It isn't one woman—it's a score, a century, of the dear things," he announced.

Her face fell. "Oh—?" she faltered.

"It's a love affair with a type," he explained.

She frowned upon him. "A love affair with a type—?"

"Yes," said he.

She shook her head. "I give you up. In one breath you speak like a Mohammedan, in the next like—I don't know what."

"With these," said John, his hand stretched towards the wall. "With the type of the Quattrocento."

He got upon his feet, and moved from picture to picture; and a fire, half indeed of mischief, but half it may be of real enthusiasm, glimmered in his eyes.

"With these lost ladies of old years; these soft-coloured shadows, that were once rosy flesh; these proud, humble, innocent, subtle, brave, shy, pious, pleasure-loving women of the long ago. With them; with their hair and eyes and jewels, their tip-tilted, scornful, witty little noses, their 'throats so round and lips so red,' their splendid raiment; with their mirth, pathos, passion, kindness and cruelty, their infinite variety, their undying youth. Ah, the pity of it! Their undying youth—and they so irrevocably dead. Peace be to their souls! See," he suddenly declaimed, laughing, "how the sun, the very sun in heaven, is contending with me, as to which of us shall do them the greater homage, the sun that once looked on their living forms, and remembers—see how he lights memorial lamps about them," for the sun, reflected from the polished floor, threw a sheen upon the ancient canvases, and burned bright in the bosses of the frames. "Give me these," he wound up, "a book or two, and a jug of the

parroco's 'included wine'—my wilderness is paradise enow."

Lady Blanchemain's eyes, as she listened, had become deep wells of disappointment, then gushing fountains of reproach.

"Oh, you villain!" she groaned, when he had ended, shaking her pretty fist. "So to have raised my expectations, and so to dash them!—Do you *really* mean," still clinging to a shred of hope, she pleaded, "really, really mean that there's no—no actual woman?"

"I'm sorry," said John, "but I'm afraid I really, really do."

"And you're not—not really in love with any one?"

"No—not really," he said, with a mien that feigned contrition.

"But at your age—how old are you?" she broke off to demand.

"Somewhere between twenty-nine and thirty, I believe," he laughed.

"And in such a romantic environment, and not on account of a woman! It's downright unnatural," she declared. "It's flat treason against the kingly state of youth."

"I'm awfully sorry," said John. "Yet, after

all, what's the good of repining? Nothing could happen even if there were a woman."

Lady Blanchemain looked alarmed.

"Nothing could happen? What do you mean? You're not *married?* If you are, it must be secretly, for you're put down as single in Burke."

"To the best of my knowledge," John reassured her, laughing, "Burke is right. And I prayerfully trust he may never have occasion to revise his statement."

"For mercy's sake," cried she, "don't tell me you're a woman-hater!"

"That's just the point," said he. "I'm an adorer of the sex."

"Well, then?" questioned she, at a loss. "How can you 'prayerfully' wish to remain a bachelor? Besides, aren't you heir to a peerage? What of the succession?"

"That's just the point," he perversely argued. "And you know there are plenty of cousins."

"Just the point! just the point!" fretted Lady Blanchemain. "What's just the point? Just the point that you aren't a woman-hater?—just the point that you're heir to a peerage? You talk like Tom o' Bedlam."

"Well, you see," expounded John, unruffled, "as an adorer of the sex, and heir to a peerage, I shouldn't want to marry a woman unless I could support her in what they call a manner becoming her rank—and I couldn't."

"Couldn't?" the lady scoffed. "I should like to know why not?"

"I'm too—if you will allow me to clothe my thought in somewhat homely language—too beastly poor."

"*You—poor?*" ejaculated Lady Blanchemain, falling back.

"Ay—but honest," asseverated John, to calm her fears.

She couldn't help smiling, though she resolutely frowned.

"Be serious," she enjoined him. "Doesn't your uncle make you a suitable allowance?"

"I should deceive you," answered John, "if I said he made me an *un*suitable one. He makes me, to put it in round numbers, exactly no allowance whatsoever."

"The—old—curmudgeon!" cried Lady Blanchemain, astounded, and fiercely scanning her words.

"No," returned John, soothingly, "he isn't

a curmudgeon. But he's a very peculiar man. He's a Spartan, and he lacks imagination. It has simply never entered his head that I could *need* an allowance. And, if you come to that, I can't say that I positively do. I have a tiny patrimony—threepence a week, or so—enough for my humble necessities, though scarcely perhaps enough to support the state of a future peeress. No, my uncle isn't a curmudgeon; he's a very fine old boy, of whom I'm immensely proud, and though I've yet to see the colour of his money, we're quite the best of friends. At any rate, you'll agree that it would be the deuce to pay if I were to fall in love."

"Ffff," breathed Lady Blanchemain, fanning. "What did I say of an age of prose and prudence? Yet you don't *look* cold-blooded. What does money matter? *Dominus providebit.* Go read Browning. What's 'the true end, sole and single' that we're here for? Besides, have you never heard that there are such things as marriageable heiresses in the world?"

"Oh, yes, I've heard that," John cheerfully assented. "But don't they almost always squint or something? I've heard, too, that

there are such things as tufted fortune-hunters, but theirs is a career that requires a special vocation, and I'm afraid I haven't got it."

"Then you're no true Marquis of Carabas," the lady took him smartly up.

"You've found me out—I'm only a *faux-marquis*," he laughed.

"Thrrr!" breathed Lady Blanchemain, and for a little while appeared lost in thought. By-and-by she got up and went to the window, and stood looking out. "I never saw a lovelier landscape," she said, musingly. "With the grey hills, and the snow-peaks, and the brilliant sky, with the golden light and the purple shadows, and the cypresses and olives, with the river gleaming below there amongst the peach-blossoms, and—isn't that a blackcap singing in the mimosa? It only needs a pair of lovers to be perfect—it *cries* for a pair of lovers. And instead of them, I find—what? A hermit and celibate. Look here. Make a clean breast of it. *Are* you cold-blooded?" she asked from over her shoulder.

John merely giggled.

"It would serve you right," said she, truculently, "if some one were to rub your

eyes with love-in-idleness, to make you dote upon the next live creature that you see."

John merely chuckled.

"I'll tell you what," she proceeded, "I'm a bit of an old witch, and I'll risk a soothword. As there isn't already a woman, there'll shortly be one—my thumbs prick. The stage is set, the scene is too appropriate, the play's inevitable. It was never in the will of Providence that a youth of your complexion should pass the springtime in a spot all teeming with romance like this, and miss a love adventure. A castle in a garden, a flowering valley, and the Italian sky—the Italian sun and moon! Your portraits of these smiling dead women too, if you like, to keep your imagination working. And blackcaps singing in the mimosa. No, no. The lady of the piece is waiting in the wings—my thumbs prick. Give her but the least excuse, she'll enter, and . . . Good Heavens, my prophetic soul!" she suddenly, with a sort of catch in her throat, broke off.

She turned and faced him, cheeks flushed, eyes flashing.

"Oh, you hypocrite! You monstrous

fibber!" she cried, on a tone of jubilation, looking daggers.

"Why? What's up? What's the matter?" asked John, at fault.

"How *could* you have humbugged me so?" she wailed, in delight, reverting to the window. "Anyhow, she's charming. She's made for the part. I couldn't pray for a more promising heroine."

"She? Who?" asked he, crossing to her side.

"Who? Fie, you slyboots!" she crowed with glee.

"Ah, I see," said John.

For, below them, in the garden, just beyond the mimosa (all powdered with fresh gold) where the blackcap was singing, stood a woman.

IX

She stood in the path, beside a sun-dial, from which she appeared to be taking the time of day, a crumbling ancient thing of grey stone, green and brown with mosses; and she was smiling pleasantly to herself the while, all unaware of the couple who watched her from above. She wore a light-coloured garden-frock, and was bare-headed, as one belonging to the place. She was young—two or three and twenty, by her aspect: young, slender, of an excellent height, and, I hope you would have agreed, a beautiful countenance. She studied the sun-dial, and smiled; and what with her dark eyes and softly chiselled features, the pale rose in her cheeks and the deeper rose of her mouth, with her hair too, almost black in shadow, but where the sun touched it turning to sombre red,—yes, I think you would have agreed that she was beautiful. Lady Blanchemain, at any rate, found her so.

"She's quite lovely," she declared. "Her face is exquisite—so sensitive, so spiritual; so distinguished, so aristocratic. And so *clever*," she added, after a suspension.

"Mm!" said John, his forehead wrinkled, as if something were puzzling him.

"She has a figure—she holds herself well," said Lady Blanchemain.

"Mm!" said John.

"I suppose," said she, "you're too much a mere man to be able to appreciate her frock? It's the work of a dressmaker who knows her business. And that lilac muslin (that's so fashionable now) really does, in the open air, with the country for background, show to immense advantage. Come—out with it. Tell me all about her. Who *is* she?"

"That's just what I'm up a tree to think," said John. "I can't imagine. How long has she been there? From what direction did she come?"

"Don't try to hoodwink me any longer," remonstrated the lady, unbelieving.

"I've never in my life set eyes on her before," he solemnly averred.

She scrutinized him sharply.

"Hand on heart?" she doubted.

And he, supporting her scrutiny without flinching, answered, "Hand on heart."

"Well, then," concluded she, with a laugh, "it looks as if I were even more of an old witch than I boasted—and my thumbs pricked to some purpose. Here's the lady of the piece already arrived. There, she's going away. How well she walks! Have after her—have after her quick, and begin your courtship."

The smiling young woman, her lilac dress softly bright in the sun, was moving slowly down the garden path, towards the cloisters; and now she entered them, and disappeared. But John, instead of "having after her," remained at his counsellor's side, and watched.

"She came from that low doorway, beyond there at the right, where the two cypresses are; and she came at the very climax of my vatication," said her ladyship. "Without a hat, you'll hardly dispute it's probable she's staying in the house."

"No—it certainly would seem so," said John. "I'm all up a tree."

"The garden looks rather dreary and empty, now that she has left, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Yet it looked jolly enough before her advent. And see—the lizards (there are four of them, aren't there?) that whisked away from the dial at her approach, have come back. Well, *your* work's cut out. I suppose it wouldn't be possible for you to give a poor woman a dish of tea?"

"I was on the very point of proposing it," said John. "May I conduct you to my quarters?"

PART SECOND

My Friend Prospero

I

RATHER early next morning John was walking among the olives. He had gone (straight from his bed, and in perhaps the least considered of toilets: an old frieze ulster, ornamented with big buttons of mother-of-pearl, a pair of Turkish slippers, a bathing-towel over his shoulder, and for head-covering just his uncombed native thatch) he had gone for a swim, some half a mile upstream, to a place he knew where the Rampio—the madcap Rampio, all shallows and rapids—rests for a moment in a pool, wide and deep, translucent, inviting, and, as you perceive when you have made your plunge, of a most assertive chill. Now he was on his leisurely way home, to the presbytery and what passed there for breakfast.

The hill-side rose from the river's bank in a series of irregular terraces, upheld by rough stone walls. The gnarled old trees bent towards

each other and away like dwarfs and crook-backs dancing a fantastic minuet; and in the grass beneath them, where the sun shot his fiery darts and cast his net of shadows, Chloris had scattered innumerable wildflowers: hyacinths, the colour of the sky; violets, that threaded the air for yards about with their sentiment-provoking fragrance; tulips, red and yellow; sometimes a tall, imperial iris; here and there little white nodding companies of jonquils. Here and there, too, the dusty-green reaches were pointed by the dark spire of a cypress, alone, in a kind of glooming isolation; here and there a blossoming peach or almond, gaily pink, sent an inexpressible little thrill of gladness to one's heart. The air was sweetened by many incense-breathing things besides the violets,—by moss and bark, the dew-laden grass, the moist brown earth; and it was quick with music: bees droned, leaves whispered, birds called, sang, gossiped, disputed, and the Rampio played a crystal accompaniment.

John swung onwards at ease, while lizards, with tails that seemed extravagantly long, fled from before his feet, terrible to them, no doubt, as an army with banners, for his Turkish

slippers, though not in their pristine youth, were of scarlet leather embroidered in a rich device with gold. And presently (an experience unusual at that hour in the olive wood) he became aware of a human voice.

"Ohé! My good men, there! Will you be so kind as to gather me some of those anemones? Here is a lira for your pains."

It was a feminine voice; it was youthful and melodious; it was finished, polished, delicately modulated. And its inflection was at once confident and gracious,—clearly the speaker took it for granted that she would receive attention, and she implied her thanks abundantly beforehand. It was a voice that evoked in the imagination a charming picture of fresh, young, confident, and gracious womanhood.

"Hello!" said John to himself. "Who is there in this part of the world with a voice like that?"

And he felt it would not be surprising if on glancing round he should behold—as, in fact, he did—the stranger of yesterday, the Unknown of the garden.

II

She stood on one of the higher terraces, (a very charming picture indeed, bright and erect, in the warm shadow of the olives), and was calling down to a couple of peasants at work on the other side of the stream. Between the thumb and forefinger of an ungloved fair right hand, she held up a silver lira.

Anemones, said she! Near to where the men were working, by the river's brink, there was a space of level ground, perhaps a hundred feet long, and tapering from half that breadth to a point. And this was simply crimson and purple with a countless host of anemones.

She called to the men, and one seeing and hearing her would have thought they must abandon everything, and spring to do her bidding. But they didn't. Pausing only long enough to give her a phlegmatic stare, as if in doubt whether conceivably she could have the

impertinence to be addressing *them*, and vouchsafing not a word, each went calmly on with his employment;—very, very calmly, *piano*, *piano*, gently, languidly, filling small baskets with fallen olives, and emptying them upon outspread canvas sheets. There are, and more's the pity, two types of Italian peasant. There's the old type, which we knew in our youth, and happily it still survives in some numbers,—the peasant who, for all his rags and tatters, has manners that will often put one's own to shame, and, with a *simpatia* like second-sight, is before one's wishes, in his eagerness to serve and please. And there is the new type, which we know to our disgust, and unhappily it multiplies like vermin,—the peasant who has lent his ear to the social democrat, and, his heart envenomed by class hatred, meets your civility with black glances and the behaviour of a churl in the sulks.

So, though her voice was sweet to hear, and though, standing there in the warm penumbra of the olive orchard, tall and erect and graceful, in her bright frock, she made a charming picture, and though she offered a silver lira as a prize, the men merely stared at her churlishly,

and went on with their work—languidly, sluggishly, as men who deemed the necessity to work an outrage, and weren't going to condone it by working with anything like a will.

Now, John Blanchemain, as I have previously mentioned, was an unselfconscious sort of fellow. In his unselfconsciousness, forgetting several trifles that might properly have weighed with him, (forgetting the tarnished gorgeousness of his Turkish slippers for example, and his towzled head, and the bathing-towel that flowed like a piece of classic drapery from his shoulder), obeying impulse and instinct, he flung himself into the breach.

"Brutes," he muttered between his teeth. Then, in his easiest man-of-the-worldy accents, "If you can wait two minutes," he called aloud to her. And therewith he went scrambling down the terraces and picked his way from stone to stone across the shallows, to the field of anemones, where their satiny petals, like crisping wavelets, all a-ripple in the moving air, shimmered with constantly changing lights. And in a twinkling he had gathered a great armful, and was clambering back.

"I beg of you," he said, in his abrupt fashion,

holding them out to her, and slightly bowing, with that nothing-doubting assurance of his, while his blue eyes (to put her entirely at her ease) smiled, frank and friendly and serene, into her dark ones.

But hers seemed troubled. She looked at the flowers, she looked at John, I think she even looked at her lira. Her eyes seemed undecided.

"Do pray take them," said he, still smiling, still frank and assured, but as if a little puzzled, a little amused, by her hesitation, and more airily a man-of-the-world than ever, his tone one of high detachment, to spare her any possible feeling of personal obligation, and to place his performance in the light of a matter of course,—as if indeed he had done nothing more than pick up and return, say, a handkerchief she might have dropped. "You were right," he owned to his thought of Lady Blanchemain; "she is beautiful." Here, at close quarters with her, one's perception of her beauty became acute,—here, under the grey old trees, in the leafy dimness, alone with her, at two paces from her, where the birds sang and the violets gave forth their fragrant breath. He saw that

her eyes were beautiful (soft and deep and luminous, despite their trouble), and her low white brow, and the dark masses of her hair, under her garden-hat, and the rose in her cheeks, and the red-rose of her mouth. And he saw and felt the beauty and the vitality of her strong young body.

But meanwhile she had stretched forth, rather timidly, that ungloved fair hand of hers, and taken the flowers.

"You are very good, I am sure. Thank you very much," she said, rather faintly, with a grave little inclination of the head.

John, always with magnificent assurance, put up his hand, to doff a man-of-the-worldy hat, and bow himself away;—and it encountered his bare locks, bare, and still wet from recent ducking. Whereupon, suddenly, the trifles he had forgotten were remembered, and at last (in the formula of the criminologist) "he realized his position:" hatless and uncombed, with the bathing-towel slung from his shoulder, in that weather-beaten old frieze coat with its ridiculous buttons, in those awful Turkish slippers,—offering, with his grand manner, flowers to a woman he didn't know, and smiling,

to put her at her ease! His pink face burned to a livelier pink, his ears went hot, his heart went cold. The bow he finally accomplished was the blighted bud of the bow he had projected; and, as the earth didn't, of its charity, open and engulf him, he hastened as best he could, and with a painful sense of slinking, to remove his crestfallen person from her range of view.

When these unselfconscious fellows are startled into selfconsciousness, I fancy they take it hard. I don't know how long it was before John had done heaping silent curses, silent but savage, upon himself, his luck, his "beastly officiousness," upon the whole afflicting incident: curses that he couldn't help diversifying now and then with a catch of splenetic laughter, as a vision of the figure he had cut would recurrently

"—— *flash upon that inward eye*
Which is the bliss of solitude."

"Oh, you *ape!*" he groaned. "Rigged out like Pudding Jack, and, with your ineffable simagrees, offering a strange woman flowers!"

If *she* had only laughed, had only smiled, it

wouldn't have been so bad, it would have shown that she understood. "But through it all," he writhed to recollect, "she was as solemn as a mourner. I suppose she was shocked—perhaps she was frightened—very likely she took me for a tramp. I wonder she didn't crown my beatitude by giving me her lira. These foreigners do so lack certain discernments."

And with that rather an odd detail came back to him. *Was* she a foreigner? For it came vaguely back that he, impulsive and unthinking, had spoken to her throughout in English. "And anyhow,"—this came distinctly back,—"it was certainly in English that she thanked me."

III

What passed for breakfast at the presbytery was the usual Continental evasion of that repast, —bread and coffee, despatched in your apartment. But at noon the household met to dine.

The dining-room, on the ground floor, long and low, with a vaulted ceiling, whitewashed, and a pavement of worn red tiles, was a clean, bare room, that (pervaded by a curious, dry, not unpleasant odour) seemed actually to smell of bareness, as well as of cleanliness. There was a table, there was a dresser, there were a few unpainted deal chairs, rush-bottomed (exactly like the chairs in the church, in all Italian churches), and there was absolutely nothing else, save a great black and white Crucifix attached to the wall. But, by way of compensation, its windows opened southwards, flooding it with sunshine, and commanding the

wonderful perspective of the valley,—the blue-grey hills, the snow-peaks, the blossoming low-lands, and the far-away opalescence that you knew to be the lake.

At noon the parroco, his niece Annunziata, and his boarder met to dine.

The parroco was a short, stout, florid, black-haired, hawk-nosed, fierce-looking, still youngish man, if five-and-forty may be reckoned youngish, with a pair of thin lips and powerful jaws which, for purposes of speech, he never opened if he could help it. Never,—till Sunday came: when, mounting the pulpit, he opened them indeed, and his pent-up utterance burst forth in a perfect torrent of a sermon, a wild gush of words, shouted at the topmost stress of a remarkably lusty voice, arresting for a minute or two by reason of the sheer physical energy it represented, and then for a long half hour exquisitely tiresome. But on week-days he maintained a prodigious silence, and this (as, though fierce-looking, he wasn't in the least really fierce) it would often be John's malicious study to tempt him to break. Besides, to-day, John was honestly concerned with the pursuit of knowledge.

Accordingly, grace being said, "You never told me," he began, assuming a mien of intelligent interest, "that the castle was haunted." He looked at the Napoleonic profile of Don Ambrogio, but from the tail of his eye he kept a watch as well upon Annunziata, and he saw that that wise little maiden became attentive.

"No," said Don Ambrogio, between two spoonfuls of soup.

"You will conceive my astonishment, then," continued John, urbanely, "when I discovered that it was."

"It isn't," said Don Ambrogio. He gave himself diligently to the business of the hour; his spoon flew backwards and forwards like a shuttle. His napkin, tucked into his Roman collar, protected his bosom, an effective white cuirass.

"Oh? Not the castle?" questioned John. "Only the garden? And the olive wood? True, on reflection, I've never seen it in the house."

"Nothing here is haunted," said the parroco. He made a signal to Annunziata, who rose to change the plates. Her big eyes were alight, her serious little face was alert; but she would

never dream of speaking in the presence of her uncle. Marcella, the cook, brought in the inevitable veal.

"Oh, for that," insisted John, courteous but firm, "I beg your pardon. I myself have seen it on two occasions; and, lest you should fancy it a subjective illusion, I may tell you that it was yesterday seen simultaneously by another."

"It? It? What is *it?*" asked the parroco, his beaked and ensanguined visage fiercer-looking than ever, as he fell upon the inevitable veal with a somewhat dull carving-knife.

"Ah," said John, "now you make me regret that I haven't a talent for word-painting. It's the form of a woman, a young woman, tall, slender, in some pale diaphanous garment, that appears here, appears there, remaining distinctly visible for some minutes, and then disappears. No, it isn't a subjective illusion. And it isn't, either," the unscrupulous creature added, after a pause, raising his voice, and speaking with emphasis, as if to repel the insinuation, while the darkness of disenchantment swept the face of Annunziata, "it isn't, either, as some imaginative people might too hastily conclude, a wraith,

a phantom, an insubstantial vapour. It's a real material form, that lives and breathes, and even, if driven to it, speaks. There's nothing supernatural about it,—unless, indeed, we take the transcendental view that Nature herself is supernatural. I was wondering, Don Ambrogio, whether, without violating a confidence, you could tell me whose form it is?"

"Nossignore," said Don Ambrogio, economizing his breath.

"Ah," sighed John, nodding resignedly, "I feared as much. Divining that I would institute inquiries, she has stolen a march upon me, and pledged you to secrecy."

"Nossignore," disavowed Don Ambrogio, raising eyes the sincerity of which there could be no suspecting.

John's face took on an expression of aggrieved surprise.

"But then why won't you tell me?"

"I cannot tell you because I do not know," said Don Ambrogio.

"Oh, I see," said John. "And yet," he argued meditatively, "that's hard to conceive. I don't for a moment mean that I doubt it—but it's hard to conceive, like the atomic theory,

and some of the articles of religion. (I hear, by-the-by, that the scientists are throwing the atomic theory over. Oh, fickle scientists! Oh, shifting sands of science!) Surely there can't be many such tall slender forms, in diaphanous garments, appearing and disappearing here and there in your parish? And one would suppose, antecedently, that you'd know them all."

"A peasant, a villager," said Don Ambrogio.

"I put it to you as an observer of life," said John, "do peasants, do villagers, wear diaphanous garments?"

"A visitor, a sight-seer, from some place on the lake," said Don Ambrogio.

"I put it to you as a student of probabilities," said John, "would a visitor, would a sight-seer, from some place on the lake, walk in the garden of the castle without a hat? And would she appear at Sant' Alessina on two days in succession?"

But Don Ambrogio had finished his veal, and when he had finished his veal he always left the table, first twice devoutly making the sign of the Cross, and then with a bow to John, pronouncing the formula, "You will graciously

permit? My affairs call me. A thousand regrets." To-day he slightly amplified that formula. "A thousand regrets," he said, "and as many excuses for my inability to afford the information desired."

After his departure, John turned to Annunziata, where, in her grey cotton pinafore, her lips parted, her big eyes two lively points of interrogation, she sat opposite to him, impatient to take up the theme.

"Well, Mistress Wisdom!" he saluted her, smiling, and waving his hand. "It is a good and wholesome thing for the young to witness the discomfiture of the wicked. Your uncle retreats with flying colours. He made, to be sure, a slender dinner, but that's his daily habit. If you have tears to shed, shed them for me. I have made none at all."

From points of interrogation, Annunziata's eyes changed to abysses of wonder, and, big as they were, seemed to grow measurably bigger.

"You have made no dinner?" she protested, in that strangely deep voice of hers, with its effect of immense solemnity.

"No, poor dear," said John, with pathos, "no, I have made no dinner."

"But you have eaten a great deal," exclaimed Annunziata, frowning, nonplussed. "And you are still eating."

"Quite so," responded John, "though I think it's perhaps the merest trifle unhandsome of you to fling it in my face. I have eaten a great deal, and I am still eating. That is what I come to table for. In an orderly life like mine there is a place for everything. I come to table to eat, just as I go to bed to sleep and to church to say my prayers. Would you have me sleep at table, eat in church, and say my prayers in bed? Eating, however, has nothing to do with the case. I spoke of dining—I said I had not dined. Now you shall be the judge. The question is, can a Christian man dine twice on the same day? Answer me that."

"Oh, no," answered Annunziata, her pale face very sober, and she lengthened out her vowels in deprecation of the idea. "At least, it would be gluttony if he did."

"There you are," cried John. "And gluttony is not the undeadliest of the Seven Deadly Sins. So, then, unless you would have me guilty of the deadly sin of gluttony, you must agree that I have not dined. For I am going

to dine this evening. I am going to dine at the Hotel Victoria at Roccadoro. I am going to dine with a lady. I am going to dine in all the pomp and circumstance of my dress-suit, with a white tie and pumps. And you yourself have said it, a Christian man may not, without guilt of gluttony, dine twice on the same day. Therefore it is the height of uncharitableness, it's a deliberate imputation of sin, to contend that I have dined already."

Annunziata followed his reasoning thoughtfully, and then gravely set him right.

"No," she said, with a drop of the eyelids and a quick little shake of the head, "you do not understand. I will explain." Her eyes were wide open again, and bright with zeal for his instruction. "You have dined already. That is a certain truth, because this meal is dinner, and you have eaten it. But to-night you are going to a dinner of ceremony—and that is different. A dinner of ceremony does not count. It is the same as a supper. My uncle himself once went to a dinner of ceremony at Bergamo. No, it will not be gluttony for you to go to a dinner of ceremony."

"You speak like a little pope," said John,

with enthusiasm. "In matters of Faith and Morals I believe you are infallible. If you could guess the load you have lifted from my conscience!" And he pushed a hearty ouf.

"I am glad," said Annunziata. And then she attempted to hark back. Curiosity again lighting her eyes, "This form that you have seen in the garden—" she began.

"Don't try to change the subject," John interrupted. "Let us cultivate sequence in our ideas. What I am labouring with hammer and tongs to drag from you is the exact date at which, somewhere between the years of our salvation 1387 and 1455, you sat for your portrait to the beatified painter Giovanni of Fiesole. Now, be a duck, and make a clean breast of it."

Annunziata's eyes clouded. A kind of scorn, a kind of pity, and a kind of patient longanimity looked from them.

"That is folly," she said, on the deepest of her deep notes, with a succession of slow, reflective, side-wise nods.

"Folly—?" repeated John, surprised, but bland. "Oh? Really?"

"Sit for my portrait between the years

1387 and 1455,—how could I?" scoffed Annunziata.

"Why? What was to prevent you?" innocently questioned he.

"*Ma come!* I was not yet alive," said she.

John looked at her with startled eyes, and spoke with animation.

"Weren't you? Word of honour? Are you sure? How do you know? Have you any definite recollection that you weren't? Can you clearly recall the period in question, and then, reviewing it in detail, positively attest that you were dead? For there's no third choice. A person must either be alive or dead. And how, if you weren't alive, how ever did it come to pass that there should be a perfect portrait of you from Giovanni's brush in the Convent of Saint Mark at Florence? Your grave little white face, and your wise little big eyes, and your eager little inquisitive profile, and your curls flowing about your shoulders, and your pinafore that's so like a peplum,—there they all are, precisely as I see them before me now. And how was Giovanni able to do them if you weren't alive? Perhaps you were pre-mortally alive in Heaven? Giovanni's

cell, as is well known, had a window that opened straight into Heaven. Perhaps he saw you through that window, and painted you without your knowing it. The name they give your portrait, by-the-by, would rather seem to confirm that theory. What do you think they call it? They call it an *un angiolo*. I've got a copy of it in England. When you come to London to visit the Queen I'll show it to you."

Annunziata gave her flowing curls a toss.

"The form of the young woman which you have seen in the garden—" she began anew.

"Ah," said John, "observe how differently the big fish and the little fish will be affected by the same bait."

"When you first spoke of it," said she, "I thought you had seen a holy apparition."

"Yes," said he. "That was because I couched my communication in language designedly misleading. I employed the terminology of ghost-lore. I said 'haunted' and 'appear,' and things like that. And you were very properly and naturally deceived. I confidently expected that you would be. No, it is not given to world-stained and world-worn old men like me to see holy apparitions."

"Old men? You are not an old man," said Annunziata.

"Oh? Not? What am I, then?" said John.

"You are a middle-aged man," said she.

"Thank you, Golden Tongue," said he, with a bow.

"And you are sure that it was merely a real person?" she pursued.

"No," said he. "I am too profoundly imbued with the basic principles of metaphysics ever to be sure of the objective reality of phenomena. I can only swear to my impression. My impression was and is that it was merely a real person."

"Then," said Annunziata, with decision, "it must be the person who is visiting the Signora Brandi."

"The Signora Brandi?" repeated John. "What a nice name! Who is the Signora Brandi?"

"She is an Austrian," said Annunziata.

"Oh— ?" said John.

"She lives in the pavilion beyond the clock-tower," said Annunziata.

"I wasn't aware," said John, "that the

pavilion beyond the clock-tower was inhabited. I wasn't aware that any part of this castle was inhabited, except the porter's lodge and the part that we inhabit. Why have I been left till now in this state of outer darkness?"

"The Signora Brandi has been absent," said Annunziata. "She has been in her own country—in Austria. But the other day she returned. And with her came a person to visit her. That is the person whose form you have seen in the garden."

"How do you know it wasn't the form of the Signora Brandi herself?" John said.

"Oh, no," said Annunziata. "The Signora Brandi is not young. She is old. She is as old as—"

"Methuselah? Sin? The hills?" suggested John, Annunziata having paused to think.

"No," said Annunziata, repudiating the suggestion with force. "No one is so old as Methuselah. She is as old as—well, my uncle."

"I see," said John. "Yes, it's all highly mysterious."

"Mysterious?" said Annunziata.

"I should think so," asseverated he. "Cryptic,

enigmatic, esoteric to the last degree. To begin with, how does the Signora Brandi, being an Austrian, come by so characteristically un-Austrian a name? Is that mysterious? And in the next place, why does an Austrian Signora Brandi so far forget what is due to her nationality as to live, not in Austria, but in Lombardy? And—as if that were not enough—at Castel Sant' Alessina? And—as if that were not more than enough—in the pavilion beyond the clock? Come, come! Mysterious!"

"You are living in Lombardy, you are living at Castel Sant' Alessina, yourself," said Annunziata.

"I hardly think so," said John. "You can scarcely with precision call this living—this is rather what purists call sojourning. But even were it otherwise, there's all the difference in the world between my case and the Signora Brandi's. I am middle-aged and foolish, but she is as old as your uncle. Don't you see the mysterious significance of that coincidence? And I haven't a young woman visiting me. *Who is the young woman?* Is that a mystery? My sweet child, we tread among mysteries. We are at the centre of a coil of mysteries. *Who is the young*

woman? And how—consider well upon this —how does it happen that the young woman speaks English? Mysterious, indeed!"

He rose, and bowed, with ceremony.

"But we burn daylight. I must not detain you longer. Suffer me to imprint upon your hand of velvet a token of my high regard."

And taking Annunziata's frail little white hand, he bent low to kiss it; and though his blue eyes were full of laughter, I think that behind the laughter there was a great deal of real fondness and admiration.

IV

HALF-WAY down the long straight avenue of ilex-trees that led from the castle to the principal entrance of the garden, Annunziata, in her pale-grey pinafore (that was so like a peplum), with her hair waving about her shoulders, was curled up in the corner of a marble bench, gazing with great intentness at a white flower that lay in her lap. It was the warmest and the peacefullest moment of the afternoon. The sun shone steadily; not a leaf stirred, not a shadow wavered; and the intermittent piping of a blackbird, somewhere in the green world overhead, seemed merely to give a kind of joyous rhythm to the silence.

"Mercy upon me! Who ever saw so young a maiden so deeply lost in thought!" exclaimed a voice.

Annunziata, her reverie thus disturbed, raised a pair of questioning eyes.

A lady was standing before her, smiling down upon her, a lady in a frock of lilac-coloured muslin, with a white sunshade.

Annunziata, who, when she liked, could be the very pink of formal politeness, rose, dropped a courtesy, and said: "Buon giorno, Signorina."

"Buon giorno," responded the smiling lady. "Buon giorno—and a penny for your thoughts. But I'm sure you could never, never tell what it was you were thinking so hard about."

"Scusi," said Annunziata. "I was trying to think of the name of this flower." She stooped and picked up the flower, which had slipped from her lap to the ground when she rose. Then she held it at arm's length, for inspection.

"Oh?" asked the lady, smiling at the flower, as she had smiled at its possessor. "Isn't it a narcissus?"

"Yes," said Annunziata. "It is a narcissus. But I was trying to think of its particular name."

The lady looked as if she did not quite understand. "Its particular name?"

"It is a narcissus," explained Annunziata, "just as I am a girl. But it must also have

its particular name, just as I have mine. It is a soul doing its Purgatory—a very good soul. If you are very good, then, when you die, you do your Purgatory as a flower. But it is not such an easy Purgatory—oh, no. For look: the flower is beautiful, but it is blind, and cannot see; and it is fragrant, but it cannot smell; and people admire it and praise it, but it is deaf, and cannot hear. It can only wait, wait, wait, and think of God. But it is a short Purgatory. A few days, and the flower will fade, and the soul will be released. I think this flower's name is Cecilia, it is so white."

The smile in the lady's eyes had brightened, as she listened; and now she gave a little laugh, a little, light, musical, pleased and friendly laugh.

"Yes," she said. "I have sometimes wondered myself whether flowers might not be the Purgatory of very good souls. I am glad to learn from you that it is true. And yes, I should think that this flower's name was sure to be Cecilia. Cecilia suits it perfectly. What, if one may ask, is *your* particular name?"

"Mariannunziata," said its bearer, not to make two bites of a cherry.

The lady's eyes grew round. "Dear me! A little short name like that?" she marvelled.

"No," returned Annunziata, with dignity. "My name in full is longer. My name in full is Giuliana Falconieri Maria Annunziata Casalone. Is that not long enough?"

"Yes," the lady admitted, "that is just long enough." And she laughed again.

"What is *your* name?" inquired Annunziata.

"My name is Maria Dolores," the lady answered. "You see, we are both named Maria."

"Of course," said Annunziata. "All Christians should be named Maria."

"So they should," agreed the lady. "Do you ever tell people how old you are?"

"Yes," said Annunziata, "if they wish to know. Why not?"

The smile in the lady's eyes shone brighter than ever. "Do you think you could be persuaded to tell me?"

"With pleasure," said Annunziata. "I am eleven years and five months. And you?"

"I am just twice as old. I am twenty-two years and ten months. So, when you are fifty, how old shall I be?"

"No," said Annunziata, shaking her head. "That trick has been tried with me before. My friend Prospero has tried it with me. You hope I will say that you will be a hundred. But it is not so. When I am fifty, you will be sixty-one, going on sixty-two."

Still again the lady laughed, apparently with great amusement.

"What a little bundle of wisdom you are!" she exclaimed.

"Yes. My friend Prospero also says that I am wise," answered Annunziata. "I like to see you laugh," she mentioned, looking critically at the face above her. "You have beautiful teeth, they are so white and shining, and so small, and your lips are so red."

"Oh," said the lady, laughing more merrily than ever. "Then you must be very entertaining, and I will laugh a great deal."

Still looking critically at the lady's face, "Are you not," demanded Annunziata, "the person who has come to visit the Signora Brandi?"

"Signora Brandi?" The lady considered. "Yes, I suppose I must be. At any rate, I am the person who has come to visit Frau Brandt."

"Frao Branta? We call her Signora Brandi here," said Annunziata. "Are you related to her?"

"No," said the lady, who always seemed inclined to laugh, though Annunziata had no consciousness of being very entertaining. "I am not related to her. I am only her friend."

"She is an Austrian," said Annunziata. "This castle belongs to Austrians. Once upon a time, very long ago, before I was born, all this country belonged to Austrians. Are you, too, an Austrian?"

"Yes." The lady nodded. "I, too, am an Austrian."

"And yet," remarked Annunziata, "you speak Italian just as I do."

"It is very good of you to say so," laughed the lady.

"No—it is the truth," said Annunziata.

"But is it not good to tell the truth?" the lady asked.

"No," said Annunziata. "It is only a duty." And again she shook her head, slowly, darkly, with an effect of philosophic melancholy. "That is very strange and very hard," she pointed out. "If you do not do that which is

your duty, it is bad, and you are punished. But if you do do it, that is not good,—it is only what you ought to do, and you are not rewarded." And she fetched her breath in the saddest of sad little sighs. Then, briskly recovering her cheerfulness, "And you speak English, besides," she said.

"Oh?" wondered the lady. "Are you a clairvoyante? How do you know that I speak English?"

"My friend Prospero told me so," said Annunziata.

"Your friend Prospero?" the lady repeated. "You quote your friend Prospero very often. Who is your friend Prospero?"

"He is a signore," said Annunziata. "He has seen you, he has seen your form, in the garden and in the olive wood."

"Oh," said the lady.

"And I suppose he must have heard you speak English," Annunziata added. "He lives at the presbytery."

"And where, by-the-by, do *you* live?" asked the lady.

"I live at the presbytery too," said Annunziata. "I am the niece of the parroco. I am

the orphan of his only brother. My friend Prospero lives with us as a boarder. He is English."

"Indeed?" said the lady. "Prospero is a very odd name for an Englishman."

"Prospero is not his name," said Annunziata. "His name is Gian. That is English for Giovanni."

"But why, then," the lady puzzled, "do you call him Prospero?"

"Prospero is a name I have given him," explained Annunziata. "One day I told his fortune. I can tell fortunes—with olive-stones, with playing-cards, or from the lines of the hand. I will tell you yours, if you wish. Well, one day, I told Prospero's, and everything came out so prosperously for him, I have called him Prospero ever since. He will be rich, though he is poor; and he will marry a dark woman, who will also be rich; and they will have many, many children, and live in peace to the end of their lives. But there!" Annunziata cried out suddenly, with excitement, waving the hand that held her narcissus. "There is my friend Prospero now, coming in the gig."

Down the avenue, sure enough, a gig was coming, a sufficiently shabby, ancient gig, drawn, however, at a very decent pace by a very decent-looking horse, and driven by John Blanchemain.

"*Ciao*, Prospero!" called Annunziata, as he passed.

And John took off his hat, a modish Panama, and bowed and smiled to her and to the lady. And one adept in reading the meaning of smiles might have read three or four separate meanings in that smile of his. It seemed to say to Annunziata, "Ah, you rogue! So already you have waylaid her, and made her acquaintance." To the lady: "I congratulate you upon your companion. Isn't she a diverting little monkey?" To himself: "And I congratulate *you*, my dear, upon being clothed and in your right mind, and upon having a proper hat to make your bow with." And to the universe at large: "By Jove, she *is* good-looking. Standing there before that marble bench, in the cool green light, under the great ilexes, with her lilac frock and her white sunshade, and Annunziata all in grey beside her,—what a subject for a painting, if

only there were any painters who knew how to paint!"

"He is going to a dinner at Roccadoro," said Annunziata, while John's back grew small and smaller in the distance. "Did you see, he had a portmanteau under the seat? He is going to a dinner of ceremony, and he will have his costume of ceremony in the portmanteau. I wonder what he will bring back with him for me. When he goes to Roccadoro he always brings something back for me. Last time it was a box of chocolate cigars. I should like to see him in his costume of ceremony. Wouldn't you?"

But the lady merely laughed. And then, taking Annunziata's chin in her hand, she looked down into her big clear eyes, and said, "I must be off now, to join Signora Brandi. But I cannot leave without telling you how glad I am to have met you, and what pleasure I have derived from your conversation. I hope we shall meet often. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Signorina," said Annunziata, becoming formally polite again. "I shall always be at your service." And she dropped another courtesy. "If you will come to see

me at the presbytery," she hospitably added, "I will show you my tame kid."

"You are all that is most kind," responded the lady, and went off smiling towards the castle.

Annunziata curled herself up in her old corner of the marble bench, and appeared to relapse into profound thought.

V

A CURIOUS little intimate inward glow, a sense, somewhere deep down in his consciousness, of elation and well-being, accompanied John all the way to Roccadoro, mingling with and sweetening whatever thoughts or perceptions occupied his immediate attention. This was a "soul-state" that he knew of old, and he had no difficulty in referring it to its cause. It was the glow and the elation which he was fortunate enough always to experience when his eye had been fed with a fresh impression of beauty ; and he knew that he owed it to-day to the glimpse he had had, in the cool light under the ilexes, of a slender figure in lilac and a tiny figure in grey, beside a soft-complexioned old marble bench in the midst of a shadowy, sunny, brown and green Italian garden.

The drive to Roccadoro from Sant' Alessina is a pleasant drive. The road follows for the most part the windings of the Rampio, so that

you are seldom out of sight of its gleaming waters, and the brawl of it, now louder, now less loud, is perpetually in your ears. To right and left you have the tender pink of blossoming almonds, with sometimes the scarlet flame of a pomegranate; and then the blue-grey hills, mantled in a kind of transparent cloth-of-gold, a gauze of gold, woven of haze and sunshine; and then, rosy white, with pale violet shadows, the snow-peaks, cut like cameos upon the brilliant azure of the sky. And sometimes, of course, you rattle through a village, with its crumbling, stained, and faded yellow-stuccoed houses, its dazzling white canvas awnings, its church and campanile, and its life that seems to pass entirely in the street: men in their shirt sleeves, lounging, smoking, spitting (else the land were not Italy!), or perhaps playing cards at a table under the leafless bush of the wine-shop; women gossiping over their needlework, or, gathered in sociable knots, combing and binding up their sleek black hair; children sprawling in the kindly dirt; the priest, biretta on head, nose in breviary, drifting slowly upon some priestly errand, and "getting through his office;"

and the immemorial goatherd, bare-legged, in a tattered sugar-loaf hat, followed by his flock, with their queer anxious faces, blowing upon his Pan's-pipes (shrill strains, in minor mode and plagal scale, a music older than Theocritus), or stopping, jealously watched by the customer's avid Italian eyes, to milk "*per due centesimi*"—say, a farthing's worth—into an outstretched, close-clutched jug. Sometimes the almond orchards give place to vineyards, or to maize fields, or to dusky groves of walnut, or to plantations of scrubby oak where lean black pigs forage for the delectable acorn. Sometimes the valley narrows to a ravine, and signs of cultivation disappear, and the voice of the Rampio swells to a roar, and you become aware, between the hills that rise gloomy and almost sheer beside you, of a great solitude: a solitude that is intensified rather than diminished by the sight of some lonely—infinitely lonely—grange, perched far aloft, at a height that seems out of reach of the world. What possible manner of human beings, you wonder, can inhabit there, and what possible dreary manner of existence can they lead? But even in the most solitary places you are

welcomed and sped on by a chorus of bird-songs. The hillsides resound with bird-songs continuously for the whole seven miles,—and continuously, at this season, for the whole four-and-twenty hours. Blackbirds, thrushes, blackcaps, goldfinches, chaffinches, sing from the first peep of dawn till the last trace of daylight has died out, and then the nightingales begin and keep it up till dawn again. And everywhere the soft air is aromatic with a faint scent of rosemary, for rosemary grows everywhere under the trees. And everywhere you have the purity and brilliancy and yet restraint of colour, and the crisp economy of line, which give the Italian landscape its look of having been designed by a conscious artist.

In and through his enjoyment of all these pleasantnesses, John felt that agreeable glow which he owed to his glimpse of the woman in the garden; and when at last he reached the Hotel Victoria, and, having dressed, found himself alone for a few moments with Lady Blanchemain, in the dim and cool sitting-room where she awaited her guests, he hastened to let her know that he shared her own opinion of the woman's charms.

"Your beauty decidedly *is* a beauty," he declared. "I wish you could have seen her as I saw her an hour ago, with a white sunshade, against a background of ilexes. It's a thousand pities that painting should be a forgotten art."

But Lady Blanchemain (magnificent in purple velvet, with diamonds round her throat and in her hair) didn't seem interested.

"Do you know," she said, "I made yesterday one of the most ridiculous blunders of my life. It's been preying upon my mind ever since. I generally have pretty trustworthy perceptions, and perhaps this is a symptom of failing powers. I told myself positively that you were an Eton and Balliol man. It never occurred to me till I was halfway home that, as a Papist, you'd be nothing of the sort."

"No," said John; "I'm afraid I'm Edgbaston and Paris. The way her hair grows low about her brow, and swoops upwards and backwards in a sort of tidal wave, and breaks loose in little curling tendrils,—it's absolutely lyrical. And the smile at the bottom of her eyes is exactly like silent music. And her mouth is a couplet in praise of love, with two red lips for rhymes. And her chin is a perfect epithalamium

of a chin. And then her figure! And then her lilac frock! Oh, it's a thousand, thousand pities that painting should be a forgotten art."

"What, the same lilac frock?" said Lady Blanchemain, absently. "Yet you certainly have the Eton voice," she mused. "And if I don't pay you the doubtful compliment of saying that you have the Balliol manner, you have at least a kind of subtilized reminiscence of it."

"I must keep a guard upon myself," said John. "She's visiting an Austrian woman who lives in a remote wing of the castle,—the pavilion beyond the clock, in fact,—an Austrian woman of the exhilarating name of Brandi."

"I'm rather in luck for my dinner to-night," said Lady Blanchemain. "I've got Agnes Scope, the niece of the Duke of Wexmouth. She arrived here this morning with her aunt, Lady Louisa. Of course I'm putting you next to her. As, besides being an extremely nice girl and an heiress, she's an ardent pervert to Romanism,—well, a word to the wise."

"Yes, I know her," said John. "We don't get on a bit. She moves on far too high a plane for a groundling like me. She's intellectual

and earnest, and my ignorance and light-mindedness wound her to the quick. She'll end, as I've told her to her face, by writing books,—serious novels, probably,—which she'll illuminate with beautiful irrelevant quotations from Browning and Cardinal Newman."

"Bother," said Lady Blanchemain. "You're perverse."

"Besides," said John, "she's engaged."

"Engaged—?" faltered Lady Blanchemain.

"Yes—to an intellectual and earnest man, named Blake—Bernard Blake—a grandson of the famous Blake of Cambridge."

Lady Blanchemain fixed him with darkening eyes.

"Are you *sure?*" she pleaded.

"I saw it officially stated in the *Morning Post*," was John's relentless answer.

"What a nuisance," said Lady Blanchemain, fanning. Her fan was of amber tortoise-shell, with white ostrich feathers, and the end sticks bore her cypher and coronet in gold.

"What a jolly fan," said John.

"Well, well," said Lady Blanchemain, reconciling herself. Then, after an instant of pensiveness, "So you're already laid low by

her beauty. But you haven't found out yet who she is?"

"Who who is?" said John, looking all at sea.

"Tut. Don't tease. Your woman at the castle."

"My woman at the castle appeared to leave you cold," he complained. "I arrived full of her, and you wouldn't listen."

"So you're already in love with her?" said Lady Blanchemain.

"No—not yet," said he. "As yet I merely recognize in her admirable material for a painting, and regret that such material should go begging for the lack of a painter. But by this time to-morrow—who can tell?"

"Have you found out who she is?" asked Lady Blanchemain.

"No—not yet," said he. "As yet I've merely found out that she's visiting an Austrian Signora Brandi, who lives (I can't think why) in the pavilion beyond the clock. But by this time to-morrow!" His gesture spoke volumes of prospective information.

"She looked like a gentlewoman," reflected his friend.

"For all the world," said he.

"Yet, if she's an Austrian—" She paused and pondered.

"Why? What's the difficulty?" said he.

"To know whether she is *born*," said Lady Blanchemain. "Among Austrians, unless you're born, you're impossible, you're nowhere. Brandi doesn't sound born, does it? We mustn't let you become enamoured of her if she isn't born."

"Brandi sounds tremendously *un*born," assented John. "And if like visits like, Signora Brandi's visitor will probably be unborn too. But to me that would rather add an attraction, —provided she's *bred*. I'm not an Austrian. I'm a Briton and a democrat. I feel it is my destiny, if ever I am to become enamoured at all, to become enamoured of the daughter of a miller,—of a rising miller, who has given his daughter advantages. 'Bred, not Born: or the Lady of the Mill'—that shall be the title of my humble heart-history. If this woman could prove to me that she was the daughter of a miller, I'm not sure I shouldn't become enamoured of her on the spot. Well, I shall know to-morrow. By this time to-morrow I

shall possess her entire *dossier*. It may interest you to learn that I am employing a detective to investigate her."

"A detective? What do you mean?" said Lady Blanchemain.

"A private detective, a female detective, whom, the next time you come to Sant' Alessina, I'll introduce to you," said John.

"What on earth do you mean?" said Lady Blanchemain.

"The most amusing, the most adorable little detective unhung," said he. "People are all love and laughter whenever they look at her. She'll worm its inmost secrets from my sphinx's heart."

"What pleasure can you take in practising upon a poor old woman who only by a sort of fluke isn't your grandmother?" said she.

"Lady Louisa FitzStephen, Miss Scope," said her servant, opening the door.

VI

The nightingales sang him home, and the moon lighted him, the liquid moon of April and Italy. As he approached the castle, through the purple and silver garden, amid the mysterious sweet odours of the night, he glanced up vaguely at the pavilion beyond the clock. He glanced up vaguely, but next second he was no longer vague.

There, on a low-hung balcony, not ten feet above him, full in the moonlight, stood a figure in white—all in white, with a scarf of white lace thrown over her dark hair. The nightingales sang and sobbed, the moon rained its amethystine fire upon the earth, the earth gave forth its mysterious sweet night odours, and she stood there motionless, and breathed and gazed and listened.

But at the sound of wheels in the avenue, she turned slightly, and looked down. Her

face was fair and delicate and pure in the moonlight, and her eyes shone darkly bright.

She turned, and looked down, and her eyes met John's.

"Given the hour and the place, I wonder whether I ought to bow," he thought.

Before he could make up his mind, however, his hand had automatically raised his hat.

She inclined her head in acknowledgment, and something softly changed in her face.

"She smiled!" he said, and caught his breath, with a kind of astonished exultancy.

That soft change in her face came and went and came again through all his dreams.

PART THIRD

My Friend Prospero

I

"Good morning, Prospero," said Annunziata.

"Good morning, Wide-awake," responded John.

He was in the octagonal room on the *piano nobile* of the castle, where his lost ladies of old years smiled on him from their frames. He had heard an approaching patter of feet on the pavement of the room beyond; and then Annunziata's little grey figure, white face, and big grave eyes, had appeared, one picture the more, in the vast carved and gilded doorway.

"I have been looking everywhere for you," she said, plaintive.

"Poor sweetheart," he commiserated her. "And can't you find me?"

"I couldn't," said Annunziata, bearing on the tense. "But I have found you *now*."

"Oh? Have you? Where?" asked he.

"*Where?*" cried she, with a disdainful movement. "But *here*, of course."

"I wouldn't be too cocksure of that," he cautioned her. "*Here* is a mighty evasive bird. For, suppose we were elsewhere, then *there* would be here, and here would be somewhere else."

"No," said Annunziata, with resolution. "Where a person is, that is always *here*."

"You speak as if a person carried his here with him, like his hat," said John.

"Yes, that is how it is," said Annunziata, nodding.

"You have a remarkably solid little head,—for all its curls, there's no confusing it," said he. "Well, have you your report, drawn up, signed, sealed, sworn to before a Commissioner for Oaths, and ready to be delivered?"

"My report—?" questioned Annunziata, with a glance.

"About the Form," said John. "I caught you yesterday red-handed in the fact of pumping it."

"Yes," said Annunziata. "Her name is Maria Dolores."

"A most becoming name," said he.

"She is very nice," said Annunziata.

"She looks very nice," said he.

"She is twenty-two years and ten months old," continued his informant.

"Fancy. As middle-aged as that," commented he.

"Yes. She is an Austrian."

"Ah."

"And as I told you, she is visiting the Signora Brandi. Only, she calls her Frao Branta."

"Frao Branta?" John turned the name on his tongue. "Branta? Branta?" What familiar German name, at the back of his memory, did it half evoke? Suddenly he had a flash. "Can you possibly mean Frau Brandt?"

Annunziata gave a gesture of affirmation.

"Yes, that is it," she said. "You sound it just as she did!"

"I see," said John. "And Brandt, if there are degrees of unbirth, is even more furiously unborn than Brandi."

"Unborn—?" said Annunziata, frowning.

"Not noble—not of the aristocracy," John explained.

"Very few people are noble," said Annunziata.

"All the more reason, then, why you and I should be thankful that we are," said he.

"You and I?" she expostulated, with a shrug of her little grey shoulders. "*Maché!* We are not noble."

"Aren't we? How do you know?" asked John. "Anyhow," he impressively moralized, "we can try to be."

"No," said she, with conclusiveness, with fatalism. "It is no good trying. Either you are noble or simple,—God makes you so,—you cannot help it. If I were noble, I should be a contessina. If you were noble, you would be a gransignore."

"And my unassuming appearance assures you that I'm not?" said he, smiling.

"If you were a gransignore," she instructed him, "you would never be such friends with me—you would be too proud."

John laughed.

"You judge people by the company they keep. Well, I will apply the same principle of judgment to your gossip, Maria Dolores. By-the-by," he broke off to inquire, "what is her Pagan name?"

"Her Pagan name? What is that?" asked Annunziata.

"Maria Dolores, I take it, is her Christian name, come by in Holy Baptism," said John. "But I suppose she will have a Pagan name, come by in the way of the flesh, to round it off with,—just as, for instance, a certain flame of mine, whose image, when I die, they'll find engraved upon my heart, has the Pagan name of Casalone."

Annunziata looked up, surprised. "Casalone? That is my name," she said.

"Yes," said John. "Yours will be the image."

Annunziata gave her head a toss. "Maria Dolores did not tell me her Pagan name," she said.

"At any rate," said he, "to judge by the company she keeps, we may safely classify her as unborn. She is probably the daughter of a miller,—of a miller (to judge also a little by the frocks she wears) in rather a large way of business, who (to judge finally by her cultivated voice, her knowledge of languages, and her generally distinguished air) has spared no expense in the matter of her

education. I shouldn't wonder a bit if she could even play the piano."

"No," agreed Annunziata, "that is very likely. But why"—she tilted upwards her inquisitive little profile—"why should you think she is the daughter of a miller?"

"Miller," said John, "I use as a generic term. Her father may be a lexicographer or a dry-salter, a designer of dirigible balloons or a manufacturer of air-pumps; he may even be a person of independent means, who lives in a big, new, stuccoed villa in the suburbs of Vienna, and devotes his leisure to the propagation of orchids: yet all the while a miller. By miller I mean a member of the Bourgeoisie: a man who, though he be well to do, well educated, well bred, does not bear coat-armour, and is therefore to be regarded by those who do with their noses in the air,—especially in Austria. Among Austrians, unless you bear coat-armour, you're impossible, you're nowhere. We mustn't let you become enamoured of her if she doesn't bear coat-armour."

Annunziata's eyes, during this divagation, had wandered to the window, the tall window with its view of the terraced garden, where the

mimosa bloomed and the blackcaps carolled. Now she turned them slowly upon John, and he saw from their expression that at last she was coming to what for her (as he had known all along) was the real preoccupation of the moment. They were immensely serious, intensely concerned, and at the same time, in their farther recesses, you felt a kind of fluttering shyness, as if *I dare not* were hanging upon *I would.*

"Tell me," she began, on a deep note, a deep coaxing note . . . Then *I dare not* got the better, and she held back . . . Then *I would* took his courage in both hands, and she plunged. "What have you brought for me from Roccadoro?" And after one glance of half-bashful, all-impassioned supplication, she let her eyes drop, and stood before him suspensive, as one awaiting the word of destiny.

John's "radiant blondeur," his yellow beard, pink face, and sea-blue eyes, lighted up, more radiant still, with subcutaneous laughter.

"The shops were shut," he said. "I arrived after closing time."

But something in his tone rendered this grim announcement nugatory. Annunziata drew a

long breath, and looked up again. "You have brought me something, all the same," she declared with conviction; and eagerly, eyes gleaming, "What is it? What is it?" she besought him.

John laughed. "You are quite right," he said. "If one can't buy, beg, or borrow, in this world, one can generally steal."

Annunziata drew away, regarded him with misgiving. "Oh, no; you would never steal," she protested.

"I'm not so sure—for one I loved," said he. "What would you have liked me to bring you?"

Annunziata thought. "I liked those chocolate cigars," she said, her face soft with reminiscence of delight.

"Ah, but we mustn't have it *toujours perdrix*," said John. "Do you, by any chance, like marchpane?"

"Marchpane?—I adore it," she answered, in an outburst of emotion.

"You have your human weaknesses, after all," John laughed. "Well, I stole a pocketful of marchpane."

Annunziata drew away again, her little white

forehead furrowed. "Stole?" she repeated, reluctant to believe.

"Yes," said he, brazenly, nodding his head.

"Oh, that was very wrong," said Annunziata, sadly shaking hers.

"No," said he. "Because, in the first place, it's a matter of proverbial wisdom that stolen marchpane's sweetest. And, in the next place, I stole it quite openly, under the eye of the person it belonged to, and she made no effort to defend her property. Seeing which, I even went so far as to explain to her *why* I was stealing it. 'There's a young limb o' mischief with a sweet tooth at Sant' Alessina,' I explained, 'who regularly levies blackmail upon me. I'm stealing this for her.' And then the lady I was stealing from told me I might steal as much as ever I thought good."

"Oh-h-h," said Annunziata, a long-drawn *Oh* of relief. "Then you didn't steal it—she *gave* it to you."

"Well," said John, "if casuistry like that can ease your conscience—if you feel that you can conscientiously receive it—" And he allowed his inflection to complete the sentence.

"Give it to me," said Annunziata, holding out her hands, and dancing up and down in glee and in impatience.

"Nenni-dà," said John. "Not till after dinner. I'm not going to be a party to the spoiling of a fair, young, healthy appetite."

Pain wrote itself upon Annunziata's brow. "Oh," she grieved, "must I wait till after dinner?"

'Yes," said John.

For a breathing-space she struggled. "Would it be bad of me," she asked, "if I begged for just a *little* now?"

"Yes," said John, "bad and bootless. You'd find me as unyielding as adamant."

"Ah, well," sighed Annunziata, a deep and tremulous sigh. "Then I will wait."

And, like a true philosopher, she proceeded to occupy her mind with a fresh interest. She looked round the room, she looked out of the window. "Why do you stay here? It is much pleasanter in the garden," she remarked.

"I came here to seek for consolation. To-day began for me with a tragic misadventure," John replied.

Annunziata's eyes grew big, compassionating

him, and, at the same time, bespeaking a lively curiosity.

"Poor Prospero," she gently murmured. "What was it?" on tip-toe she demanded.

"Well," he said, "when I rose, to go for my morning swim, I made an elaborate toilet, because I hoped to meet a certain person whom, for reasons connected with my dignity, I wished to impress. But it was love's labour lost. The certain person is an ornament of the uncertain sex, and didn't turn up. So, to console myself, I came here."

Annunziata looked round the room again. "What is there here that can console you?"

"These," said John. His hand swept the pictured walls.

"The paintings?" said she, following his gesture. "How can they console you?"

"They're so well painted," said he, fondly studying the soft-coloured canvases. "Besides, these ladies are dead. I like dead ladies."

Annunziata looked critically at the pictures, and then at him with solemn meaning. "They are very pretty—but they are not dead," she pronounced in her deepest voice.

"Not dead?" echoed John, astonished. "Aren't they?"

"No," said she, with a slow shake of the head.

"Dear me," said he. "And, when they're alone here and no one's looking, do you think they come down from their frames and dance? It must be a sight worth seeing."

"No," said Annunziata. "These are only their pictures. They cannot come down from their frames. But the ladies themselves are not dead. Some of them are still in Purgatory, perhaps. We should pray for them." She made, in parenthesis as it were, a pious sign of the Cross. "Some are perhaps already in Heaven. We should ask their prayers. And others are perhaps in Hell," she pursued, inexorable theologian that she was. "But none of them is dead. No one is dead. There's no such thing as being dead."

"But then," puzzled John, "what is it that people mean when they talk of Death?"

"I will tell you," said Annunziata, her eyes heavy with thought. "Listen, and I will tell you." She seated herself on the big round ottoman, and raised her face to his. "Have you ever been at a pantomime?" she asked.

"Yes," said John, wondering what could possibly be coming.

"Have you been at the pantomime," she continued earnestly, "when there was what they call a transformation-scene?"

"Yes," said John.

"Well," said she, "last winter I was taken to the pantomime at Bergamo, and I saw a transformation-scene. You ask me, what is Death? It is exactly like a transformation-scene. At the pantomime the scene was just like the world. There were trees, and houses, and people, common people, like any one. Then suddenly click! Oh, it was wonderful. Everything was changed. The trees had leaves of gold and silver, and the houses were like fairy palaces, and there were strange lights, red and blue, and there were great garlands of the most beautiful flowers, and the people were like angels, with gems and shining clothes. Well, you understand, at first we had only seen one side of the scene;—then click! everything was turned round, and we saw the other side. That is like life and death. Always, while we are alive, we can see only one side of things. But there is the other side, the under side.

Never, so long as we are alive, we can never, never see it. But when we die,—click! It is a transformation-scene. Everything is turned round, and we see the other side. Oh, it will be very different, it will be wonderful. That is what they call Death."

It was John's turn to be grave. It was some time before he spoke. He looked down at her, with a kind of grave laughter in his eyes, admiring, considering. What could he say? . . . What he did say, at last, was simply, "Thank you, my dear."

Annunziata jumped up.

"Oh, come," she urged. "Let's go into the garden. It is so much nicer there than here. There are lots of cockchafers. Besides"—she held out as an additional inducement—"we might meet Maria Dolores."

"No," said John. "Though the cockchafers are a temptation, I will stop here. But go you to the garden, by all means. And if you do meet Maria Dolores, tell her what you have just told me. I think she would like to hear it."

"All right," consented Annunziata, moving towards the door. "I'll see you at dinner. You won't forget the marchpane?"

II

JOHN was in a state of mind that perplexed and rather annoyed him. Until the day before yesterday, his detachment here at Sant' Alessina from ordinary human society, the absence of people more or less of his own sort, had been one of the elements of his situation which he had positively, consciously, rejoiced in,—had been an appreciable part of what he had summarized to Lady Blanchemain as "the whole blessed thing." He had his castle, his pictures, his garden, he had the hills and valley, the birds, the flowers, the clouds, the sun, he had the Rampio, he had Annunziata, he even had Annunziata's uncle; and with all this he had a sense of having stepped out of a world that he knew by heart, that he knew to satiety, a world that was stale and stuffy and threadbare, with its gilt rubbed off and its colours tarnished, into a world where everything was

fresh and undiscovered and full of savour, a great cool blue and green world that from minute to minute opened up new perspectives, made new promises, brought to pass new surprises. And this sense, in some strange way, included Time as well as space. It was as if he had entered a new region of Time, as if he had escaped from the moving current of Time into a stationary moment. Alone here, where modern things or thoughts had never penetrated, alone with the earth and the sky, the mediæval castle, the dead ladies, with Annunziata, and the parroco, and the parroco's Masses and Benedictions—to-day, he would please himself by fancying, might be a yesterday of long ago that had somehow dropped out of the calendar and remained, a fragment of the Past that had been forgotten and left over. The presence of a person of his own sort, a fellow citizen of his own period, wearing its clothes, speaking its speech, would have broken the charm, would have seemed as undesirable and as inappropriate as the introduction of an English meadow into the Italian landscape.

Yet now such a person had come, and behold, her presence, so far from breaking

the charm, merged with and intensified it,—supplied indeed the one feature needed to perfect it. A person of his own sort? The expression is convenient. A fellow citizen, certainly, of his period, wearing its clothes, speaking its speech. But a person, happily, not of his own sex, a woman, a beautiful woman; and what her presence supplied to the poetry of Sant' Alessina, making it complete, was, if you like, the Eternal Feminine. As supplied already by the painted women on the walls about him, this force had been static; as supplied by a woman who lived and breathed, it became dynamic. That was all very well; if he could have let it rest at that, if he could have confined his interest in her, his feeling about her, to the plane of pure æsthetics, he would have had nothing to complain of. But the mischief was that he couldn't. The thing that perplexed and annoyed him,—and humiliated him too, in some measure,—was a craving that had sprung up over-night, and was now strong and constant, to get into personal touch with her, to make her acquaintance, to talk with her; to find out a little what manner of soul she had, to establish some sort of human

relation with her. It wasn't in the least as yet a sentimental craving; or, if it was, John at any rate didn't know it. In its essence, perhaps, it was little more than curiosity. But it was disturbing, upsetting, it destroyed the peace and the harmonious leisure of his day. It perplexed him, it was outside his habits, it was unreasonable. "Not unreasonable to think it might be fun to talk to a pretty woman," he discriminated, "but unreasonable to yearn to talk to her as if your life hung in the balance." And in some measure, too, it humiliated him: it was a confession of weakness, of insufficiency to himself, of dependence for his contentment upon another. He tried to stifle it; he tried to fix his mind on subjects that would lead far from it. Every subject, all subjects, subjects the most discrepant, seemed to possess one common property, that of leading straight back to it. Then he said, "Well, if you can't stifle it, yield to it. Go down into the garden—hunt her up—boldly engage her in conversation." Assurance was the note of the man; but when he pictured himself in the act of "boldly engaging her in conversation," his assurance oozed away, and he was conscious

of a thrice-humiliating shyness. Why? What *was* there in the woman that should turn a brave man shy?

However, the stars were working for him. That afternoon, coming home from a stroll among the olives, he met her face to face at the gate of the garden, whither she had arrived from the direction of the village. Having made his bow, which she accepted with a smile, he could do no less than open the gate for her; and as their ways must thence lie together, up the long ilex-shaded avenue to the castle, it would be an awkward affectation not to speak. And yet (he ground his teeth at having to admit it) his heart had begun to pound so violently, (not from emotion, he told himself,—from a mere ridiculous sort of nervous excitement: what *was* there in the woman that should excite a sane man like that?) he was afraid to trust his voice, lest it should quaver and betray him. But fortunately this pounding of the heart lasted only a few seconds. The short business of getting the gate open, and of closing it afterwards, gave it time to pass. So that now, as they set forwards towards the house, he was able to look her in

the eye, and to observe, with impressiveness, that it was a fine day.

She had accepted his bow with a smile, amiable and unembarrassed; and at this, in quite the most unembarrassed manner, smiling again,—perhaps with just the faintest, just the gentlest shade of irony, and with just the slightest quizzical upward tremor of the eyebrows,—"Isn't it a day rather typical of the land and season?" she inquired.

It was the first step that had cost. John's assurance was coming swiftly back. Her own air of perfect ease in the circumstances very likely accelerated it. "Yes," he answered her. "But surely that isn't a reason for begrudging it a word of praise?"

By this he was lucky enough to provoke a laugh, a little light gay trill, sudden and brief, like three notes on a flute.

"No," she admitted. "You are right. The day deserves the best we can say of it."

"Her voice," thought John, availing himself of a phrase that had struck him in a book he had lately read, "her voice is like ivory and white velvet." And the touch, never so light, of a foreign accent with which she spoke,

rendered her English piquant and pretty,—gave to each syllable a crisp little clean-cut outline. They sauntered on for a minute or two in silence, with half the width of the road-way between them, the shaded road-way, where the earth showed purple through a thin green veil of mosses, and where irregular shafts of sunlight, here and there, turned purple and green to red and gold. The warm air, woven of garden-fragrances, hung round them palpable, like some infinitely subtile fabric. And of course blackbirds were calling, blackcaps and thrushes singing, in all the leafy galleries overhead. A fine day indeed, mused John, and indeed worthy of the best that they could say. His nervousness, his excitement, had entirely left him, his assurance had come completely back; and with it had come a curious deep satisfaction, a feeling that for the moment at any rate the world left nothing to be wished for, that the cup of his desire was full. He didn't even, now that he might do so, wish to talk to her. To walk with her was enough,—to enjoy her companionship in silence. Yes, that was it—companionship. He caught at the word. "That is what I have been unconsciously

needing all along. I flattered myself that I was luxuriating in the very absence of it. But man is a gregarious animal, and I was deceived." So he could refer the effect of her propinquity to the mere gregarious instinct, not suspecting that a more powerful instinct was already awake. Anyhow, his sense of that propinquity,—his consciousness of her, gracefully moving beside him in the sweet weather, while her summery garments fluttered, and some strange, faint, elusive perfume was shaken from them,—filled him with a satisfaction that for the moment seemed ultimate. He had no wish to talk. Their progress side by side was a conversation without words. They were getting to know each other, they were breaking the ice. Each step they took was as good as a spoken sentence, was a mutual experience, drawing them closer, helping to an understanding. They walked slowly, as by a tacit agreement.

Silence, however, couldn't in the nature of things last for ever. It was she who presently broke it.

"I owe you," she said, in her ivory voice, with her clean-cut enunciation, "a debt of

thanks." And still again she smiled, as she looked over towards him, her dark eyes glowing, her dark hair richly drooping, in the shadow of a big hat of wine-coloured straw.

John's eyes were at a loss. "Oh—?" he wondered.

"For a pleasure given me by our friend Annunziata," she explained. "This morning she told me a most interesting parable about Death. And she mentioned that it was you who had suggested to her to tell it me."

"Oh," said John, laughing, while the pink of his skin deepened a shade. "She mentioned that, did she? I'm glad if you don't feel that I took a good deal upon myself. But she had just told the same parable to me, and it seemed a pity it shouldn't have a larger audience."

Then, after a few more paces taken again in silence, "What a marvellous little person she is, Annunziata!" said Maria Dolores.

"She's to a marvellous degree the right product of her milieu," said John.

Maria Dolores did not speak, but her eyes questioned, "Yes? How do you mean?"

"I mean that she's a true child of the presbytery," he replied, "and at the same time

a true child of this Italy, where Paganism has never perfectly died. She has been carefully instructed in her catechism, and she has fed upon pious legends, she has breathed an ecclesiastical atmosphere, until the things of the Church have become a part of her very bone. She sees everything in relation to them, translates everything in terms of them. But at the same time odd streaks of Paganism survive in her. They survive a little—don't they?—in all Italians. Wherever she goes her eye reads omens. She will cast your fortune for you with olive-stones. The woods are peopled for her by fauns and dryads. When she takes her walks abroad, I've no doubt, she catches glimpses of Proteus rising from the lake, and hears old Triton blow his wreathed horn."

Maria Dolores looked interested.

"Yes," she said, slowly, thoughtfully, and meditated for an interval. By-and-by, "You know," she recommenced, "she's a sort of little person about whom one can't help feeling rather frightened." And her eyes looked to his for sympathetic understanding.

But his were interrogative. "No? Why should one feel frightened about her?"

"Oh," said Maria Dolores, with a movement, "it isn't exactly easy to tell why. One's fears are vague. But—well, for one thing, she thinks so much about Death. Death and what comes after,—they interest her so much. It doesn't seem natural, it makes one uneasy. And then she's so delicate-looking. Sometimes she's almost transparent. In every way she is too serious. She uses her mind too much, and her body too little. She ought to have more of the gaiety of childhood, she ought to have other children to romp with. She's too much like a disembodied spirit. It all alarms one."

John, as she spoke, frowned, pondering. When she had done, his frown cleared, he shook his head.

"I don't think it need," he said. "Her delicacy, her frailness, have never struck me as indicating weakness,—they seem simply the proper physical accompaniments of her crystalline little soul,—she's made of a fine and delicate clay. She thinks about Death, it is true, but not in a morbid way,—and that's a part of her ecclesiastical tradition ; and she thinks quite as much about life,—she thinks about everything.

I agree with you, it's a pity she has no other children. But she isn't by any means deficient in the instincts of childhood. She can enjoy a chocolate cigar, for instance, as well as another ; and as for marchpane, I have her own word that she adores it."

Maria Dolores gave another light trill of laughter.

"Yes, I'm aware of her passion for marchpane. She confided it to me this morning. And as, in reply to her questions, I admitted that I rather liked it myself, she very generously offered to bring me some this afternoon,—which, to be sure, an hour ago, she did."

She laughed again, and John laughed too.

"All the same," she insisted, "I can't help that feeling of uneasiness about her. Sometimes, when I look at her, I can almost see her wings. What will be her future, if she grows up? One would rather not think of her as married to some poor Italian, and having to give herself to the prosaic sort of existence that would mean."

"The sordid sort of existence," augmented John. "No, one would decidedly rather not. But she will never marry. She will enter

religion. Her uncle has it all planned out. He destines her for the Servites."

"Oh? The Servites—the Mantellate? I am glad of that," exclaimed Maria Dolores. "It is a most beautiful order. They have an especial devotion to Our Lady of Sorrows."

"Yes," said John, and remembered it was for Our Lady of Sorrows that she who spoke was named.

Slow though their march had been, by this time they had come to the end of the avenue, and were in the wide circular sweep before the castle. They stopped here, and stood looking off, over the garden, with its sombre cypresses and bright beds of geranium, down upon the valley, dim and luminous in a mist of gold. Great, heavy, fantastic-shaped clouds, pearl-white with pearl-grey shadows, piled themselves up against the scintillant dark blue of the sky. In and out among the rose-trees near at hand, where the sun was hottest, heavily flew, with a loud bourdonnement, the cock-chafers promised by Annunziata,—big, blundering, clumsy, the scorn of their light-winged and business-like competitors, the bees. Lizards lay immobile as lizards cast in bronze, only

their little glittering, watchful pin-heads of eyes giving sign of life. And of course the blackcaps never for a moment left off singing.

They stood side by side, within a yard of each other, in silent contemplation of these things, during I don't know how many long and, for John, delicious seconds. Yes, he owned it to himself, it was delicious to feel her standing there beside him, in silent communion with him, contemplating the same things, enjoying the same pleasantnesses. Companionship—companionship: it was what he had been unconsciously needing all along! . . . At last she turned, and, withdrawing her eyes lingeringly from the landscape, looked into his, with a smile. She did not speak, but her smile said, just as explicitly as her lips could have done, "What a scene of beauty!"

And John responded aloud, with fervour, "Indeed, indeed it is."

"And so romantic," she added. "It is like a scene out of some old high musical romance."

"The most romantic scene I know," said he. "All my life I have thought so."

"Oh?" said she, looking surprise. "Have you known it all your life?"

"Well,—very nearly," said he, with half a laugh. "I saw it first when I was ten. Then for long years I lost it,—and only recovered it, by accident, a month ago."

Her face showed her interest. "Oh? How was that? How did it happen?"

"When I was ten," John recounted, half laughing again, "I was travelling with my father, and, among the many places we visited, one seemed to me a very vision of romance made real. A vast and stately castle, in a garden, in a valley, with splendid halls and chambers, and countless beautiful pictures of women. All my life I remembered it, dreamed of it, longed to see it again. But I hadn't a notion where it was, save vaguely that it was somewhere in Italy; and, my poor father being dead, there was no one I could ask. Then, wandering in these parts a month ago, I stumbled upon it, and recognized it. Though shrunken a good deal in size, to be sure, it was still recognizable, and as romantic as ever."

Maria Dolores listened pensively. When he had reached his period, her eyes lighted up.

"What a charming adventure!" she said. "And so, for you, besides its general romance, the place has a personal one, all your own. I, too, have known it for long years, but only from photographs. I suppose I should never have seen the real thing, except for a friend of mine coming to live here."

"I wonder," said John, "that the people who own it never live here."

"The Prince of Zelt-Neuminster?" said she. "No,—he doesn't like the Italian Government. Since Lombardy passed from Austria to Italy, the family have entirely given up staying at Sant' Alessina."

"In those circumstances," said John, "practical-minded people, I should think, would get rid of the place."

"Oh," said she, laughing, "the Prince, in some ways, is practical-minded enough. He has this great collection of Italian paintings, which, by Italian law, he mayn't remove from Italian soil; and if he were to get rid of Sant' Alessina, where could he house them? In other ways, though, he is perhaps not so practical. He is one of those Utopians who believe that the present Kingdom of Italy must perforce

before long make shipwreck ; and I think he holds on to Sant' Alessina in the dream of coming here in triumph, and grandly celebrating that event."

"I see," said John, nodding. "That is a beautiful ideal."

"Good-bye," said she, flashing a last quick smile into his eyes ; and she moved away, down a garden path, towards the pavilion beyond the clock.

III

And now, I should have imagined, for a single session, (and that an initial one), he had had enough. I should have expected him to spend the remainder of his day, a full man, in thankful tranquillity, in agreeable retrospective rumination. But no. Indulgence, it soon appeared, had but whetted his appetite. After a quarter-hour of walking about the garden, during which his jumble of sensations and impressions,—her soft-glowing eyes, her soft-drooping hair, under her wine-red hat; her slender figure, in its fluttering summery muslin, and the faint, faint perfume (like a far-away memory of rose-leaves) that hovered near her; her smile, and the curves, when she smiled, of her rose-red lips, and the gleam of her snow-white teeth; her laugh, her voice, her ivory voice; her pretty crisp-cut English; her appreciation of Annunziata, her disquieting presentiments concerning her; and

his deep satisfaction in her propinquity, her "companionship;" and the long shaded fragrant avenue, and the bird-songs, and the gentle weather,—after a quarter-hour of anything but thankful tranquillity, a quarter-hour of unaccountable excitement and exaltation, during which his jumble of impressions and sensations settled themselves, from ebullition, into some sort of quiescence, he began to grow restlessly aware that, so far from having had enough, he had had just a sufficient taste to make him hunger keenly for more and more. It was ridiculous, but he couldn't help it. And as there seemed no manner of likelihood that his hunger would soon be fed, it was trying. At the best, he could not reasonably hope to see her again before to-morrow; and even then—? What ghost of a reason had he to hope that even then he could renew their conversation? He had owed that to-day to the bare hazard of their ways lying together. To-morrow, very likely, at the best, he might get a bow and a smile. Very likely it might be days before he should again have anything approaching a real talk with her. And what—a new consideration, that struck a sudden terror

to his soul—what if her visit to Frau Brandt was to be a short one? What if, to-morrow even, she were to depart? "Her very ease in talking with me, a stranger, may quite well have been due to the fact that she knew she would never see me again," he argued. . . . So he was working himself into a fine state of despondency, and the world was rapidly being resolved into dust and ashes, when Heaven sent him a diversion. Nay, indeed, Heaven sent him two diversions.

IV

THERE was a sound of wheels on gravel, of horses' hoofs on stone, and Lady Blanchemain's great high-swung barouche, rolling superbly forth from the avenue, drew up before the Castle, Lady Blanchemain herself, big and soft and sumptuous in silks and laces, under a much-befurbelowed, much-befringed, lavender-hued silk sunshade, occupying the seat of honour. John hastened across the garden, hat in hand, to welcome her.

"Jump in," she commanded, with a smile, and an imperious sweep of the arm. "I have come to take you for a drive."

The footman (proud man) held open the door, and John jumped in. But just as the footman (with an air) had closed the door behind him, and before the coachman had touched up his horses, there came a rhythm of running footsteps, and the voice of Annunziata called, insistently, "Prospero! Prospero!"

Then, all out of breath, her pale cheeks pink, her curls in disarray, Annunziata arrived beside the carriage, and, no wise abashed by that magnificent equipage, nor by the magnificent old lady throning in it, (no wise abashed, but, from the roundness of her eyes, a good deal surprised and vastly curious), she explained, gasping, "A telegram," and held up to John a straw-coloured envelope.

"Thank you," said he, taking it, and waving a friendly hand. "But you should not run so fast," he admonished her, with concern.

Whereupon the carriage drove off, Annunziata standing and watching, always round-eyed, till it was out of sight.

"What an interesting-looking child!" said Lady Blanchemain.

"Yes," said John. "I should have liked to introduce her to you."

"Who is she?" asked the lady.

"She's the private detective I told you of. She's my affinity. She's the young limb o' mischief for whom I ravaged your stores of marchpane. She's the niece of the parroco."

"Hum!" said Lady Blanchemain. "Why does she call you—what was it?—Prospero?"

"She's an optimist. She's a bird of good omen," answered John. "She's satisfied herself, by consulting an oracle, that Fortune has favours up her sleeve for me. She encouragingly anticipates them by calling me Prospero before the fact."

Lady Blanchemain softly laughed. "That's very nice of her, and very wise. Aren't you going to read your telegram?"

"I didn't know whether you'd permit," said John.

"Oh pray," said she, with a gesture.

The carriage by this time had left the garden, and the coachman had turned his horses' heads northwards, away from the lake, towards the Alps, where their snowy summits, attenuated by the sun and the distance and the blue air, looked like vapours rising into the sky.

John tore open his envelope, read, frowned, and uttered a half-stifled ejaculation,—something that sounded rather like "I say!" and vaguely like "By Jove!"

"No bad news, I hope?" inquired the lady, sympathetic, and trying to speak as if she didn't know what curiosity meant.

"Excellent news, on the contrary," said John,

"but a bolt from the blue." And he offered her the paper.

"Am on my way to Rome," she read aloud. "Could I come to you for a day? Winthorpe, Hotel Cavour, Milan."—"Winthorpe?" She pursed her lips, as one tasting something. "I don't know the name. Who is he? What's his County?" she demanded,—she, who carried the County Families in her head.

John chuckled. "He hasn't got a County—he's only an American," he said, pronouncing that genial British formula with intention.

"Oh," sighed Lady Blanchemain, her expectations dashed; and drawing in her skirts, she sank a little deeper into her corner.

"He hasn't got a County," repeated John. "But he's far and away the greatest swell I know."

"A swell? An American?" Lady Blanchemain pressed down her lips, and gave a movement to her shoulders.

"An aristocrat, a patrician," said John.

"Fudge!" said Lady Blanchemain. "Americans and Australians—they're anything you like, but they're never that."

John laughed. "I adore," he said, "our

light and airy British way of tarring Americans and Australians with the same brush,—the descendants of transported convicts and the descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers!"

"Is your Winthorpe man a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers?" asked Lady Blanchemain, dryly.

"Indeed he is," said John. "He's descended from ten separate individuals who made the first voyage in the *Mayflower*. And he holds, by-the-by, intact, the lands that were ceded to his family by the Indians the year after. That ought to recommend him to your Ladyship,—an unbroken tenure of nearly three hundred years."

"Old acres," her ladyship admitted, cautiously, "always make for respectability."

"Besides," John carelessly threw out, "he's a baronet."

Lady Blanchemain sat up. "A baronet?" she said. "An American?"

"Alas, yes," said John, "a mere American. And one of the earliest creations,—by James the First, no less. His patent dates from 1612. But he doesn't use the title. He regards it, he pretends, as merged in a higher dignity."

"What higher dignity?" asked the lady, frowning.

"That of an American citizen, he says," chuckled John.

"Brrr!" she breathed, impatient.

"And moreover," John gaily continued, "besides being descended from the Pilgrim Fathers, he's descended in other lines from half the peerage of Seventeenth Century England. And to top up with, if you please, he's descended from Alfred the Great. He's only an American, but he can show a clear descent bang down from Alfred the Great! I think the most exquisite, the most subtle and delicate pleasure I have ever experienced has been to see English people, people of yesterday, cheerfully patronizing him."

"You've enlarged my sphere of knowledge," said Lady Blanchemain, grimly. "I had never known that there was blood in America. Does this prodigious personage talk through his nose?"

"Worse luck, no," said John. "I wish he did—a little—just enough to smack of his soil, to possess local colour. No, he talks for all the world like you or me,—which exposes him

to compliments in England. 'An American? Really?' our tactful people cry, when he avows his nationality 'Upon my word, I should never have suspected it.'"

"I suppose, with all the rest, he's rich?" asked Lady Blanchemain.

"Immensely," assented John. "Speaking of Fortune and her favours, she's withheld none from him."

"Then he's good-looking, too?"

"He looks like a Man," said John.

"Hum!" said Lady Blanchemain, moving. "If *I* had received a wire from a creature of such proportions, I've a feeling I'd answer it."

"I've a very similar feeling myself," laughed John. "When we turn back, if you think your coachman can be persuaded to stop at the telegraph office in the village, I'll give my feeling effect."

"I think we might turn back now," said Lady Blanchemain. "It's getting rather gloomy here." She looked round, with a little shudder, and then gave the necessary order. The valley had narrowed to what was scarcely more than a defile between two dark and rugged hillsides,

—pine-covered hillsides that shut out the sun, smiting the air with chill and shadow, and turning the Rampio, whose brawl seemed somehow to increase the chill, turning the sparkling, sportive Rampio to the colour of slate. "It puts one in mind of brigands," she said, with another little shudder. But though the air was chilly, it was wonderfully, keenly fragrant with the incense of the pines.

"Well," she asked, when they were facing homewards, "and your woman? What of her?"

"Nothing," said John. "Or, anyhow, very little." (It would be extremely pleasant, he felt suddenly, to talk of her; but at the same time he felt an extreme reluctance to let his pleasure be seen.)

"But your private detective?" said Lady Blanchemain. "Weren't her investigations fruitful?"

"Not very," said he. "She learnt little beyond her name and age."

"And what *is* her name?" asked the lady.

"Her name is Maria Dolores," answered John, (and he experienced a secret joy, strange to him, in pronouncing it).

"Maria Dolores?" said Lady Blanchemain, (and he experienced a secret joy in hearing it). "Maria Dolores—what?"

"My detective didn't discover her Pagan name," said John.

"So that you are still in doubt whether she's the daughter of a miller?" Lady Blanchemain raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, no: I think she's a miller's daughter safely enough," said he. "But she's an elaborately chiselled and highly polished one. Her voice is like ivory and white velvet; and to hear her speak English is a revelation of the hidden beauties of that language."

"Hum!" said Lady Blanchemain, eyeing him. "So you've advanced to the point of talking with her?"

"Well," answered John, weighing his words, "I don't know whether I can quite say that. But accident threw us together for a minute or two this afternoon, and we could scarcely do less, in civility, than exchange the time of day."

"And are you in love with her?" asked Lady Blanchemain.

"I wonder," said he. "What do *you* think?

Is it possible for a man to be in love with a woman he's seen only half a dozen times all told, and spoken with never longer than a minute or two at a stretch?"

"*Was* it only a minute or two—*really?*" asked Lady Blanchemain, wooing his confidence with a glance.

"No," said John. "It was probably ten minutes, possibly fifteen. But they passed so quickly, it's really nearer the truth to describe them as one or two."

Lady Blanchemain shifted her sunshade, and screwed herself half round, so as to face him, her soft old eyes full of smiling scrutiny and suspicion.

"I never can tell whether or not you're serious," she complained. "If you *are* serious, —well, *à quand le mariage?*"

"The marriage?" cried John. "How could I marry her? Such a thing's out of all question."

"Why?" asked she.

"A miller's daughter!" said John. "Would you have me marry the daughter of a miller?"

"You said yourself yesterday—" the lady reminded him.

"Ah, yes," said he. "But night brings counsel."

"If she's well educated," said Lady Blanchemain, "if she's well-bred, what does it matter about her father? Though a nobody in Austria, where nothing counts but quarterings, he's probably what we'd call a gentleman in England. Suppose he's a barrister? Or the editor of a newspaper? Or——"

She paused, thoughtful-eyed, to think of respectable professions. At last she gave up the effort.

"Well, anything decent," she concluded, "so long as he had plenty of money."

"Ah," said John, sadly, and with perhaps mock humility. "If he had plenty of money, he'd never consent to his daughter marrying a son of poverty like me."

"Pooh! For a title?" cried Lady Blanchemain. "Besides, you have prospects. Isn't your name Prospero?"

"I have precious little faith in oracles," said John.

"I advise you to have more," said Lady Blanchemain, with a smile that seemed occult.

And now her carriage entered the village,

and she put him down at the telegraph office.

"Don't wait," said John. "The walk from here to the Castle is nothing, and it would take you out of your way."

"Well, good-bye, then," said she. "And cultivate more faith in oracles—when they're auspicious."

Alone, she drew from some recondite fold of her many draperies a letter, an unsealed letter, which she opened, spread out, and proceeded to read. It was a long letter in her ladyship's own handsome, high-bred, old-fashioned handwriting; and it was addressed to Messrs. Farrow, Bernscot, and Tisdale, Solicitors, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. She read it twice through, and at last (with a smile that seemed occult) restored it to its envelope. "Stop at the Post Office," she said to her coachman, as they entered Roccadoro; and to her footman, giving him the letter, "Have that registered, please."

Annunziata lay in wait for John in the garden. She ran up, and seized him by the arm. Then, skipping beside him, as he walked on, "Who was she? Where did she come

from? Where did she take you? Whom was the telegram from?" she demanded in a breath, nestling her curls against his coat-sleeve.

"*Piano, piano,*" remonstrated John. "One question at a time. Now, begin again."

"Whom was the telegram from?" she obeyed, beginning at the end.

"Ah," said he, "the telegram was from *my* friend Prospero. He's coming here to-morrow. We must ask your uncle whether he can give him a bed."

"And the old lady?" pursued Annunziata. "Who was she?"

"The old lady was my fairy godmother," said John, building better than he knew.

PART FOURTH

My Friend Prospero

I

Pacing together backwards and forwards, as they talked, John and his friend Winthorpe presented a striking and perhaps interesting contrast. John was tall, but Winthorpe seemed a good deal taller—though, (trifles in these matters looming so large), had actual measurements been taken, I dare say half an inch would have covered the difference. John was lean and sinewy, but "rounded off" at the joints, and of a pliant carriage, so that it never occurred to you to think of him as *thin*. Winthorpe's spare figure, spare and angular, with its greater height, held unswervingly to the plane of the perpendicular, appeared absolutely to be constructed of nothing but bone and tendon. John's head, with its yellow hair, its curly beard verging towards red, its pink skin, and blue eyes full of laughter, might have served a painter as a model for the head of Mirth. Winthorpe's,—

with brown hair cropped close, and showing the white of the scalp ; clean-shaven, but of a steely tint where the razor had passed ; with a marked jaw-bone and a salient square chin ; with a high-bridged determined nose, and a white forehead rising vertical over thick black eyebrows, and rather deep-set grey eyes,—well, clap a steeple-crowned hat upon it, and you could have posed him for one of his own Puritan ancestors. The very clothes of the men carried on their unlikeness,—John's loose blue flannels and red sailor's knot, careless-seeming, but smart in their effect, and showing him careful in a fashion of his own ; Winthorpe's black tie and dark tweeds, as correct as Savile Row could turn them out, yet somehow, by the way he wore them, proclaiming him immediately a man who never gave two thoughts to his dress. If, however, Winthorpe's face was the face of a Puritan, it was the face of a Puritan with a sense of humour—the lines about the mouth were clearly the footprints of smiles. It seemed the face of a sensitive Puritan, as well, and (maugre that high-bridged nose) of a gentle—the light in his clear grey eyes was a kindly and gentle light. After all,

Governor Bradford, as his writings show,—though he tried hard, perhaps, not to let them show it—was a Puritan with a sense of humour; John Alden and Priscilla were surely sensitive and gentle: and Winthorpe was descended from Governor Bradford, and from John Alden and Priscilla. The two friends walked backwards and forwards in the great open space before the Castle, and talked. They had not met for nearly two years, and had plenty to talk about.

II

SEATED at one of the open windows of the pavilion beyond the clock, Maria Dolores (in a pale green confection of I know not what airy, filmy tissue) looked down, and somewhat vaguely watched them,—herself concealed by the netted curtain, which, according to Italian usage, was hung across the casement, to mitigate the heat and shut out insects. She watched them at first vaguely, and only from time to time, for the rest going on with some needlework she had in her lap. But by-and-by she dropped her needlework altogether, and her watching became continuous and absorbed.

"What a singular-looking man!" she thought, studying Winthorpe. "What an ascetic-looking man! He looks like an early Christian martyr. He looks like a priest. I believe he *is* a priest. English priests," she remembered, "when they travel, often dress as laymen. Yes,

he is a priest, and a terribly austere one—I shouldn't like to go to him for confession. But in spite of his austerity, he seems to be extraordinarily happy about something just at present. That light in his eyes,—it is almost a light of ecstasy. It is a light I have never seen in any eyes, save those of priests and nuns."

Winthorpe, while that "almost ecstatic" light shone in his eyes, had been speaking.

Now, as he paused, John, with a glance of gay astonishment, halted, and turned so as to face him. John's lips moved, and it was perfectly plain that he was exclaiming, delightedly, "Really? *Really?*"

Winthorpe joyously nodded: whereupon John held out both hands, got hold of his friend's, and, his pink face jubilant, shook them with tremendous heartiness.

"The priest has received advancement—he is probably to be made a bishop," inferred Maria Dolores; "and Signor Prospero is congratulating him."

The men resumed their walk; but for quite a minute John kept his hand on Winthorpe's shoulder, and again and again gently patted it,

murmuring, "I am so glad, so immensely glad." Maria Dolores was quite sure that this was what he murmured, for, though no word could reach her, John's beaming face spoke louder than his voice.

At last John let his hand drop, and, eyebrows raised a little, asked a question.

"But how did it happen? But tell me all about it," was what he seemed to say.

And Winthorpe (always with something of that ecstatic light in his eyes) proceeded to answer. But it was a longish story, and lasted through half a dozen of their forward and backward ambulations. Apparently, furthermore, it was a story which, as it developed, became less and less agreeable to the mind of John; for his face, at first all awake with interest, all aglow with pleasure, gradually sobered, gradually darkened, took on a frown, expressed dissent, expressed disapprobation, till, finally, with an impatient movement, he interrupted, and began —speaking rapidly, heatedly—to protest, to remonstrate."

"Ah," thought Maria Dolores, "the priest is to be made a bishop, sure enough,—but a missionary bishop. It isn't for nothing that

he looks like an early Christian martyr. He is going to some outlandish, savage part of the world, where he will be murdered by the natives, or die of fever or loneliness. He is a man who has listened to the Counsels of Perfection. But his unascetic friend Prospero (one would say June remonstrating with December) can't bring himself to like it."

John remonstrated, protested, argued. Winthorpe, calmly, smilingly, restated his purpose and his motives. John pleaded, implored, appealed (so the watcher read his gesture) to earth, to heaven. Winthorpe took his arm, and calmly, smilingly, tried to soothe, tried to convince him. John drew his arm free, and, employing it to add force and persuasiveness to his speech, renewed his arguments, pointed out how unnecessary, inhuman, impossible the whole thing was. "It's monstrous. It's against all nature. There's no *reason* in it. What does it *rhyme* with? It's wilfully going out of your way to seek, to create, wretchedness. My mind simply refuses to accept it." It was as if Maria Dolores could hear the words. But Winthorpe, calm and smiling, would not be moved. John shook his head, muttered, shrugged

his shoulders, threw up his hands, muttered again. "Was ever such pig-headed obstinacy! Was ever such arbitrary, voluntary blindness! I give you up, for a perverse, a triple-pated madman!" And so, John muttering and frowning, Winthorpe serenely smiling, reiterating, they passed round the corner of the Castle buildings, and were lost to Maria Dolores' view.

III

That afternoon, seated on the moss, under a tall eucalyptus tree near to Frau Brandt's pavilion, Maria Dolores received a visit from Annunziata.

Annunziata's pale little face was paler, her big grave eyes were graver, even than their wont. She nodded her head, slowly, portentously; and her glance was heavy with significance.

Maria Dolores smiled. "What is the matter?" she cheerfully inquired.

"Ah," sighed Annunziata, deeply, with another portentous head-shake, "I wish I knew."

Maria Dolores laughed. "Sit down," she suggested, making room beside her on the moss, "and try to think."

Annunziata sat down, curled herself up. "Something has happened to Prospero," she said, *de profundis*.

"Oh?" asked Maria Dolores. "What?" She seemed heartlessly cheerful, and even rather amused.

"Ah," sighed Annunziata, "that is what I wish I knew. He has had a friend to pass the day with him."

"Yes?" said Maria Dolores. "I expect I saw his friend walking with him this morning?"

"*Già*," said Annunziata. "They have been walking about all day. *His* friend Prospero he calls him. But he doesn't look very prosperous. He looks like a slate-pencil. He is long and thin, and dark and cold, and hard, just like a slate-pencil. He would not stay the night, though we had a bed prepared for him. He is going to Rome, and Prospero has driven him to the railway station at Cortello. I hate him," wound up Annunziata, simply.

"Mercy!" exclaimed Maria Dolores, opening her eyes. "Why do you hate him?"

"Because he must have said or done something very unkind to Prospero," answered Annunziata. "Oh, you should see him. He is so sad—so sad and so angry. He keeps scowling, and shaking his head, and saying

things in English, which I cannot understand, but I am sure they are sad things and angry things. And he would not eat any dinner,—no, not that much," (Annunziata measured off an inch on her finger), "he who always eats a great deal,—*eh*, *ma molto*, *molto*," and, separating her hands, she measured off something like twenty inches in the air.

Maria Dolores couldn't help laughing a little at this. But afterwards she said, on a key consolatory, "Ah, well, he has gone away now, so let us hope your friend Prospero will promptly recover his accustomed appetite."

"Yes," said Annunziata, "I hope so. But oh, that old slate-pencil man, how I hate him! I would like to—*uhhh!*" She clenched her little white fist, and shook it, threateningly, vehemently, while her eyes fiercely flashed. . . . Next instant, however, her mien entirely changed. Like a light extinguished, all the fierceness went out of her face, making way for what seemed pain and terror. "There," she cried, pain and terror in her voice, "I have offended God. Oh, I am so sorry, so sorry. My sin, my sin, my sin," she murmured, bowing her head, and thrice striking her breast.

"I take back every word I said. I do not hate him. I would not hurt him—I would not even stick a pin in him—if I had him at my mercy. No—I would do anything I could to help him. I would give him anything I had that he could want. I would give him my coral rosary. I would give him "—she hesitated, struggled, and at last, drawing a deep breath, gritting her teeth, in supreme renunciation—"yes, I would give him my tame kid," she forced herself to pronounce, with a kind of desperate firmness. "But see," she wailed, her little white brow a mesh of painful wrinkles, "it is all no good. God is still angry. Oh, what shall I do?" And, to the surprise and distress of Maria Dolores, she burst into a sudden passion of tears, sobbing, sobbing, with that abandonment of grief which only children know.

"My dear, my dear," exclaimed Maria Dolores, drawing her to her. "My dearest, you mustn't cry like that. Dear little Annunziata. What is it? Why do you cry so, dear one? Answer me. Tell me."

But Annunziata only buried her face in Maria Dolores' sleeve, and moaned, while long,

tremulous convulsions shook her frail little body. Maria Dolores put both arms about her, hugged her close, and laid her cheek upon her hair.

"Darling Annunziata, don't cry. Why should you cry so, dearest? God is not angry with you. Why should you think that God is angry with you? God loves you, darling. Everyone loves you. There, there—dearest—don't cry. Sweet one, dear one."

Transitions, with Annunziata, were sometimes inexplicably rapid. All at once her sobbing ceased; she looked up, and smiled, smiled radiantly, from a face that was wet and glistening with tears. "Thanks be to God," she piously exulted; "God is not angry any more."

"Of course He isn't," said Maria Dolores, tightening her hug, and touching Annunziata's curls lightly with her lips. "But He was never angry. What made you think that God was angry?"

Annunziata's big eyes widened. "Didn't you notice?" she asked, in a hushed voice, amazed.

"No," wondered Maria Dolores. "What was there to notice?"

"He made them draw a cloud over the sun," Annunziata whispered. "Didn't you notice that when I said I would like to—when I said what I said about that friend of Prospero's—just then they drew a cloud across the sun? That is a sign that God is angry. The sun, you know, is the window in Heaven through which God looks down on the world, and through which the light of Heaven shines on the world. And when the window is open, we feel happy and thankful, and wish to sing and laugh. But when we have done something to make God angry with us, then He sends angels to draw clouds over the window, so that we may be shut out of His sight, and the light of Heaven may be shut off from us. And then we are lonely and cold, and we could quarrel with anything, even with the pigs. God wishes to show us how bad it would be always to be shut off from His sight. But now they have drawn the cloud away, so God is not angry any more. I made a good act of contrition, and He has forgiven me."

Maria Dolores smiled, but under her smile there was a look of seriousness, a look of concern.

"My dear," she said smiling, and looking

concerned, "you should try to control your vivid little imagination. If every time a cloud crosses the sun, you are going to assume the responsibility for it, and to fancy that you have offended God, I'm afraid you'll have rather an agitated life."

"Oh, no; not *every* time," exclaimed Annunziata, and she was manifestly on the point of making a fine distinction, when abruptly the current of her ideas was diverted. "Sh-h! There comes Prospero," she cried, starting up. "I can see the top of his white hat above the rhododendron bushes. He has driven his friend to Cortello, and come home. I must run away, or he will see that I've been crying. Don't tell him," she begged, putting her finger on her lips; and she set off running, towards the presbytery, just as John stepped forth from behind the long hedge of rhododendrons.

IV

JOHN stepped forth from behind the rhododendrons, with a kind of devil-may-care, loose, aimless gait, the brim of his Panama pulled brigandishly down over one ear, his hands in the pockets of his coat, his head bent, his brow creased, his eyes sombre, every line and fibre of his person advertising him the prey of morose disgust. But when he saw Maria Dolores, he hastily straightened up, unpocketed his hands, took off his hat (giving it a flap that set the brim at a less truculent angle), and smiled. And when, the instant after, he caught sight of the flying form of Annunziata, his smile turned into a glance of wonder.

"What is the matter with Annunziata? Why is she running with all her legs like that?" he asked.

Maria Dolores had the tiniest catch of laughter. "She is running away from you," she answered.

"From *me?*" marvelled John. "*Je suis donc un foudre de guerre?* What on earth is she running away from me for?"

Maria Dolores smiled mysteriously.

"Ah," she said, "she asked me not to tell you. I am in the delicate position of confidante."

"And therefore I hope you'll tell me with the less reluctance," said John, urbanely unprincipled. "A confidante always betrays her confidence to some one,—that's the part of the game that makes it worth while."

Maria Dolores' smile deepened.

"In that pale green frock, on that bank of dark-green moss, with her complexion and her hair,—by Jove, how stunning she is!" thought John, in a commotion.

"Well," she said, "Annunziata ran away because she didn't want you to see that she'd been crying."

John raised his eyebrows, the blue eyes under them becoming expressive of dismay.

"Crying?" he echoed. "The poor little kiddie! What had she been crying about!"

"That is a long story, and involves some of her peculiar theological tenets," said Maria

Dolores. "But, in a single word, about your friend."

John's eyebrows descended to their normal level, and drew together.

"Crying about my friend? What friend?" he puzzled.

"Your friend the priest—the man who has been passing the day here with you," explained Maria Dolores.

John gave a start, threw back his head, and eyed her with astonishment.

"That is extraordinary," he exclaimed.

"What?" asked she, lightly glancing up.

"That you should call him my friend the priest," said John, wagging a bewildered head.

"Why? Isn't he a priest? He has all the air of one," said Maria Dolores.

"No; he's an American millionaire," said John, succinctly.

Maria Dolores moved in her place, and laughed.

"Dear me!" she said, "I did strike wide of the mark. An American millionaire should cultivate a less deceptive appearance. With that thin, shaven face of his, and that look of an early Christian martyr in his eyes, and the

dark clothes he wears, wherever he goes he's sure to be mistaken for a priest."

"Yes," said John, with a kind of grimness; "that's what's extraordinary. He comes of a long line of bigoted Protestants, he's a reincarnation of some of his stern old Puritan forebears, and you find that he looks like their pet abomination, a Romish priest. Well, you have a prophetic eye."

Maria Dolores gazed up inquiringly. "A prophetic eye?" she questioned.

"I merely mean," said John, with thaumaturgic airiness, "that the man is on his way to Rome to study for the priesthood." And he gave a thaumaturgic toss to his bearded chin.

"Oh!" cried Maria Dolores, and leaned back against her eucalyptus tree, and laughed again.

John, however, dejectedly shook his head, and gloomed.

"Laugh if you will," he said, "though it seems to me as far as possible from a laughing matter, and I think Annunziata chose the better part when she cried."

"I beg your pardon," said Maria Dolores, perhaps a trifle stiffly. "I was only laughing

at the coincidence of my having supposed him to be a priest, and then learning that, though he isn't, he is going to become one. I was not laughing at the fact itself. Nor was it," she added, her stiffness leaving her, and a little glimmer of amusement taking its place, "that fact which made Annunziata cry."

"I dare say not," responded John, "seeing that she couldn't possibly have known it. But it might well have done so. It's enough to bring tears to the eyes of a brazen image." He angrily jerked his shoulders.

"What?" cried Maria Dolores, surprised, rebukeful. "That a man is to become a holy priest?"

"Oh, no," said John. "That fact alone, detached from special circumstances, might be a subject for rejoicing. But the fact that this particular man, *in* his special circumstances, is to become a priest—well, I simply have no words to express my feeling." He threw out his arms, in a gesture of despair. "I'm simply sick with rage and pity. I could gnash my teeth and rend my garments."

"Mercy!" cried Maria Dolores, stirring. "What are the special circumstances?"

"Oh, it's a grisly history," said John. "It's a tale of the wanton, ruthless, needless, purposeless sacrifice of two lives. It's his old black icy Puritan blood. Winthorpe—that's his name—had for years been a freethinker, far too intellectual and enlightened, and that sort of thing, you know, to believe any such old wives' tale as the Christian Religion. He and I used to have arguments, tremendous ones, in which, of course, neither in the least shook the other. Darwin and Spencer, with a dash of his native Emerson, were religion enough for him. Then this morning he arrived here, and said, 'Congratulate me. A month ago I was received into the Church.'"

Maria Dolores looked up, animated, her dark eyes sparkling.

"How splendid!" she said.

"Yes," agreed John, "so I thought. 'Congratulate me,' he said. I should think I did congratulate him,—with all my heart and soul. But then, naturally, I asked him how it had happened, what had brought it to pass."

"Yes—?" prompted Maria Dolores, as he paused.

"Well," said John, his face hardening, "he

thereupon proceeded to tell me in his quiet way, with his cool voice (it's like smooth-flowing cold water), absolutely the most inhuman story I have ever had to keep my patience and listen to."

"What was the story?" asked Maria Dolores.

"If you can credit such inhumanity, it was this," answered John. "It seems that he fell in love—with a girl in Boston, where he lives. And what's more, and worse, the girl fell in love with him. So there they were, engaged. But she was a Catholic, and his state of unbelief was a cause of great grief to her. So she pleaded with him, and persuaded, till, merely to comfort her, and without the faintest suspicion that his scepticism could be weakened, he promised to give the Catholic position a thorough reconsideration, to read certain books, and to put himself under instruction with a priest: which he did. Which he did, if you please, with the result, to his own unutterable surprise, that one fine day he woke up and discovered that he'd been convinced, that he *believed*."

"Yes?" said Maria Dolores, eagerly. "Yes—? And then? And the girl?"

"Ah," said John, with a groan, "the girl! That's the pity of it. That's where his black old Puritan blood comes in. Blood? It isn't blood—it's some fluid form of stone—it's flint dissolved in vinegar. The girl! Mind you, she loved him, they were engaged to be married. Well, he went to her, and said, 'I have been converted. I believe in the Christian religion —your religion. But I can't believe a thing like that, and go on living as I lived when I didn't believe it,—go on living as if it weren't true, or didn't matter. It does matter—it matters supremely—it's the only thing in the world that matters. I can't believe it, and *marry*—marry, and live in tranquil indifference to it. No, I must put aside the thought of marriage, the thought of personal happiness. I must sell all I have and give it to the poor, take up my cross and follow Him. I am going to Rome to study for the priesthood.' Imagine," groaned John, stretching out his hands, "*imagine* talking like that to a woman you are supposed to love, to a woman who loves you." And he wrathfully ground his heel into the earth.

Maria Dolores looked serious.

"After all, he had to obey his conscience," she said. "After all, he was logical, he was consistent."

"Oh, his conscience! Oh, consistency!" cried John, with an intolerant fling of the body. "At bottom it's nothing better than common self-indulgence, as I took the liberty of telling him to his face. It's the ardour of the convert, acting upon that acid solution of flint which takes the place of blood in his veins, and causing sour puritanical impulses, which (like any other voluptuary) he immediately gives way to. It's nothing better than unbridled passion. Conscience, indeed! Where was his conscience when it came to *her?* Think of that poor girl—that poor pale girl—who *loved* him. Oh, Mother of Mercy!"

He moved impatiently three steps to the left, three steps to the right, beating the palm of one hand with the back of the other.

"What did she do? How did she take it?" asked Maria Dolores.

"What she ought to have done," said John, between his teeth, "was to scratch his eyes out. What she did do, as he informed me with a seraphic countenance, was not merely to approve

of everything he said, but to determine to do likewise. So, while he's on his way to Rome, to get himself tonsured and becassocked, she's scrubbing the floors of an Ursuline convent, as a novice. And there are two lives spoiled." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, no, no," contended Maria Dolores, earnestly, shaking her head, "not spoiled. On the contrary. It is sad, in a way, if you like, but it is very beautiful, it is heroic. Their love must have been a very beautiful love, that could lead them to such self-sacrifice. Two lives given to God."

"Can't people give their lives to God without ceasing to *live?*" cried John. "If marriage is a sacrament, how can they better give their lives to God than by living sanely and sweetly in Christian marriage? But these people withdraw from life, renounce life, shirk and evade the life that God had prepared for them and was demanding of them. It's as bad as suicide. Besides, it implies such a totally perverted view of religion. Religion surely is given to us to help us to *live*, to show us *how* to live, to enable us to meet the difficulties, emergencies, responsibilities of life. But these people look

upon their religion as a mandate to turn their backs on the responsibilities of life, and scuttle away. And as for *love!* Well, she no doubt did love, poor lady. But Winthorpe! No. When a man loves he doesn't send his love into a convent, and go to Rome to get himself becassocked." He gave his head a nod of finality.

"That, I fancy, is a question of temperament," said Maria Dolores. "Your friend has the ascetic temperament. And it does not by any means follow that he loves less because he resigns his love. What you call an inhuman story seems to me a wonderfully noble one. I saw your friend this morning, when he and you were walking together, and I said to myself, 'That man looks as if he had listened to the Counsels of Perfection. His vocation shines through him.' I think you should reconcile yourself to his accepting it."

"Well," said John, on the tone of a man ready to change the subject, "I owe him at least one good mark. His account of his 'heart-state' led me to examine my own, and I discovered that I am in love myself,—which is a useful thing to know."

"Oh?" said Maria Dolores, with a little effect of reserve.

"Yes," said John, nothing daunted, "though unlike his, mine is an unreciprocated flame, and unavowed."

"Ah?" said Maria Dolores, reserved indeed, but not without an undertone of sympathy.

"Yes," said John, playing with fire, and finding therein a heady mixture of fearfulness and joy. "The woman I love doesn't dream I love her, and dreams still less of loving me,—for which blessed circumstance may Heaven make me truly thankful."

The sentiment sounding unlikely, Maria Dolores raised doubtful eyes. They shone into John's; his drank their light; and something violent happened in his bosom.

"Oh—?" she said.

"Yes," said he, thinking what adorable little hands she had, as they lay loosely clasped in her lap, thinking how warm they would be, and fragrant; thinking too what fun it was, this playing with fire, how perilous and exciting, and how egotistical he must seem to her, and how nothing on earth should prevent him from continuing the play. "Yes," he said, "it's a

circumstance to be thankful for, because, like Winthorpe himself, though for different reasons, I'm unable to contemplate marriage." His voice sank sorrowfully, and he made a sorrowful movement.

"Oh—?" said Maria Dolores, her sympathy becoming more explicit.

"Winthorpe's too beastly puritanical—and I'm too beastly poor," said he.

"Oh," she murmured. Her eyes softened; her sympathy deepened to compassion.

"She must certainly put me down as the most complacent egotist in two hemispheres, so to regale her with unsolicited information about myself," thought John; "but surely it would need six hemispheres to produce another pair of eyes as beautiful as hers."—"Yes," he said, "I should be 'looking up' if I asked even a beggar-maid to marry me."

Maria Dolores' beautiful eyes became thoughtful as well as compassionate.

"But men who are poor work and earn money," she said, on the tone that young women adopt when the spirit moves them to preach to young men. And when the spirit does move them to that, things may be looked

upon as having advanced an appreciable distance, the ball may be looked upon as rolling.

"So I've heard," said John, his head in the clouds. "It must be dull business."

Maria Dolores dimly smiled. "Do *you* do no work?" she asked.

"I've never had time," said John. "I've been too busy enjoying life."

"Oh," said Maria Dolores, with the intonation of reproach.

"Yes," said he, "enjoying the Humour, the Romance, the Beauty of it,—and combine the three together, make a chord of 'em, you get the Divinity. Or, to take a lower plane, the world's a stage, and life's the drama. I could never leave off watching and listening long enough to do any work."

"But do you not wish to play a part in the drama, to be one of the actors?" asked his gentle homilist. "Have you no ambition?"

"Not an atom," he easily confessed. "The part of spectator seems to me by far the pleasantest. To sit in the stalls and watch the incredible jumble-show, the reason-defying topsy-turvydom of it, the gorgeous, squalid, tearful, and mirthful pageantry, the reckless

inconsequences, the flagrant impossibilities; to watch the Devil ramping up and down like a hungry lion, and to hear the young-eyed cherubim choiring from the skies: what better entertainment could the heart of man desire?"

"But are we here merely to be entertained?" she sweetly preached, while John's blue eyes somewhat mischievously laughed, and he felt it hard that he couldn't stop her rose-red mouth with kisses. "Aren't we here to be, as the old-fashioned phrase goes, of use in the world? Besides, now that you are in love, surely you will never sit down weakly, and say, 'I am too poor to marry,' and so give up your love,—like your friend Winthorpe indeed, but for ignoble instead of noble motives. Surely you will set to work with determination, and earn money, and make it possible to marry. Or else your love must be a very poor affair." And her adorable little hands, as they lay ("like white lilies," thought John) upon the pale-green fabric of her gown, unclasped themselves, opened wide for an instant, showing the faint pink of their palms, then lightly again interlaced their fingers.

He laughed. "You are delicious," he said

to her fervently, in silence. "My love is all right," he said aloud. "I love her as much as it is humanly possible to love. I love her with passion, with tenderness; with worship, with longing; I love her with wonder; I love her with sighs, with laughter. I love her with all I have and with all I am. And I owe one to Winthorpe for having unwittingly opened my eyes to my condition. But earning money? I've a notion it's difficult. What could I do?"

"Have you no profession?" she asked.

"Not the ghost of one," said he, with nonchalance.

"But is there no profession that appeals to you—for which you feel that you might have a taste?" Her dark eyes were very earnest.

"Not the ghost of one," said he, dissembling his amusement. "Professions—don't they all more or less involve sitting shut up in stuffy offices, among pigeon-holes full of dusty and futile papers, doing tiresome tasks for the greater glory of other people, like a slave in the hold of a galley? No, if I'm to work, I must work at something that will keep me above decks—something that will keep me out of

doors, in touch with the air and the earth. I might become an agricultural labourer,—but that's not very munificently paid ; or a farmer, —but that would require perhaps more capital than I could command, and anyhow the profits are uncertain. I've an uncle who's a bit of a farmer, and year in, year out, I believe he makes a loss. Well, what's left ? . . . Ah, a gardener. I don't think I should half mind being a gardener."

Maria Dolores looked as if she weren't sure whether or not to take him seriously.

"A gardener ? That's not very munificently paid either, is it ? " she suggested, trying her ground.

"Alas, I fear not," sighed John. Then he made a grave face. "But would you have me entirely mercenary ? Money isn't everything here below."

Maria Dolores smiled. She saw that for the moment at least he was not to be taken seriously.

"True," she agreed, "though it ran in my mind that to earn money, so that you might marry, was your only motive for going to work at all."

"I had forgotten that," said the light-minded fellow. "I was thinking of occupations that would keep one in touch with the earth. A gardener's occupation keeps him constantly in the charmingest possible sort of touch with her, and the most intimate."

"Do they call the earth *her* in English?" asked Maria Dolores. "I thought they said *it*."

"I'm afraid, for the greater part, they do," answered John. "But it's barbarous of them, it's unfilial. Our brown old mother,—fancy begrudging her the credit of her sex! Our brown and green old mother; our kindly, bounteous mother; our radiant, our queenly mother, old, and yet perennially, radiantly young. Look at her now," he cried, circling the garden with his arm, and pointing to the farther landscape, "look at her, shining in her robes of pearl and gold, shining and smiling,—one would say a bride arrayed for the altar. Such is her infinite variety. Her infinite variety, her infinite abundance, the fragrance and the sweetness of her,—oh, I could fall upon my face and worship her, like a Pagan of Eld. The earth and all that grows and lives upon her, the

blossoming tree, the singing bird,—I could build temples to her."

"And the crawling snake?" put in Maria Dolores, a gleam at the bottom of her eyes.

"The crawling snake," quickly retorted John, "serves a most useful purpose. He establishes the *raison d'être* of man. Man and his heel are here to crush the serpent's head."

Maria Dolores leaned back, softly laughing.

"Your infatuation for the earth is so great," she said, "mightn't your lady-love, if she suspected it, be jealous?"

"No," said John, "it is the earth that might be jealous, for, until I saw my lady-love, she was the undivided mistress of my heart. For the rest, my lady-love enjoys, upon this point, my entire confidence. I have kept nothing from her."

"That is well," approved Maria Dolores. "And the sky and the sea," still softly laughing, she asked, "have they no place in your affections?"

"The sky is her tiring-maiden, and I love the sky for that," said John. "'Tis the sky that clothes her in her many-coloured raiment, and holds the light whereby her beauty is made

manifest. And the sea is a jewel that she bears upon her bosom,—a magical jewel, whence, with the sky's aid, she draws the soft rain that is her scent and her cosmetic. 'Fragrant the fertile earth after soft showers.' Do you know, I could almost forgive the dour and detestable Milton everything for the sake of those seven words. They show that in the sense of smell he had at least one attribute of humanity."

Maria Dolores' dark eyes were quizzical.

"The dour and detestable Milton?" she exclaimed. "Poor Milton! What has he done to merit such anathema?"

"It isn't what he has done, but what he *was*," said John. "That he was dour nobody will deny, dour and sour and inhuman. Ask those unfortunate, long-suffering daughters of his, if you doubt it. *They* could tell you stories. But he was worse. He was a scribe and a Pharisee, a pragmatical, self-righteous, canting old scribe and Pharisee. And he was worse still, and still worse yet. He was—what seems to me to-day the worstest thing unhung—he was a Puritan. Like Winthorpe's, his blood was black and icy and vinegarish. Like

Winthorpe— But there. I mustn't abuse Winthorpe any more, and I must try to forgive Milton. Milton wrote seven good words, and Winthorpe unwittingly opened a lover's eyes to his condition."

He paused, and smiled down upon her, and his newly opened (and very blue) blue eyes said much. Her eyes were dreaming on the landscape, where it shone in pearl and gold. However, as she gave no sign of finding his conversation wearisome, he took heart, and continued.

"For when he told me how he had put his love away, never again to see her, and how at that moment she would be scrubbing floors (or taking the discipline, perhaps ?) in a convent of Ursulines, suddenly, and without any action of the will on my part, there rose before me the vision of a certain woman;—a woman I knew a little, admired immensely, very much liked, but didn't for an instant suppose I was seriously in love with. And involuntarily, with the vision of her before me, I asked myself whether, *mutatis mutandis*, I could have done as he had, and in a flash I saw that I could not,—that not for the wealth of Ormus and of Ind could I or would

I give her up, if once I had her. So, by that token, and by the uncommon wrath with which his tale inflamed me," John, with a rhetorical flourish, perorated, "I discovered that I loved." And again his eyes said much.

Hers were still on the prospect.

"Yet if you only know her a little, how can you love her?" she asked, in a musing voice.

"Did I say I only know her a little?" asked John. "I know her a great deal. I know her through and through. I know that she is pure gold, pure crystal; that she is made of all music, all light, all sweetness, and of all shadow and silence and mystery too, as women should be. I know that earth holds naught above her. I do not care to employ superlatives, so, to put it in the form of an understatement, I know that she is simply and absolutely perfect. If you could see her! If you could see her eyes, her deep-glowing, witty, humorous, mischievous, innocent eyes, with the soul that burns in them, the passion that sleeps. If you could see the black soft masses of her hair, and her white brow, and the pale-rose of her cheeks, and the red-rose of her lovely smiling mouth. If you could see her figure, slender and strong,

and the grace and pride of her carriage,—the carriage of an imperial princess. If you could see her hands,—they lie in her lap like languid lilies. And her voice,—'tis the colour of her mouth and the glow of her eyes made audible. And if you could whisper to yourself her melodious and thrice adorable name. I know her a great deal. When I said that I only knew her a little, I meant it in the sense that she only knows me a little,—which after all, alas, for practical purposes comes to the same thing."

He had spoken with emphasis, with fervour, his pink face animated and full of intention. Maria Dolores kept her soft-glowing eyes resolutely away from him, but I think the soul that burned in them (if not the passion that slept) was vaguely troubled. *Qui parle d'amour* —how does the French proverb run? Did she vaguely feel perhaps that the seas they were sailing were perilous? Anyhow, as John saw with sinking heart, she was at the point of putting an end to their present conjunction,—she was preparing to rise. He would have given worlds to offer a helping hand, but (however rich in worlds) he was, for the occasion, poor in courage. When love comes in at the

door, assurance as like as not will fly out of the window. So she rose unaided.

"Let us hope," she said, giving him a glance in which he perceived an under-gleam as of not unfriendly mockery, "that she will soon come to know you better."

"Heaven forbid!" cried he, with a fine simulation of alarm. "It is upon her ignorance of my true character that I base such faint hopes as I possess of some day winning her esteem."

Maria Dolores laughed, nodded, and lightly moved away.

"My son," said John to himself, "you steered precious close to the wind. You had best be careful."

And then he was conscious of a sudden change in things. The garden smiled about him, the valley below laughed in the breeze, the blackcaps sang, the many windows of the Castle glistened in the sun; but their beauty and their pleasantness had departed, had retired with her into the long, low, white-walled, red-roofed pavilion. He was conscious of a sudden change in things, and of a sudden acute and bitter depression within himself.

"These are great larks," he said; "great larks while they last,—but what's the good of them in the end? What do they lead to? What's the good of coquetting with blisses that can't be yours?" And he breathed a prodigious sigh. "When shall I see her again?" he asked, and thereupon was seized by his old terror—his terror of yesterday, though it seemed to him a terror he had known all his life—lest he should never see her again. "She's only a visitor. What's to prevent her leaving this very night?"

The imagination was intolerable. He entered the Castle court, and climbed the staircase of honour, and rambled through the long suites of great empty rooms, empty of everything save the memory of the past and the portraits of the dead, there, if he might, for a time at least, to lose himself and to forget her.

V

"WHO is the young man you have been talking with so long?" asked Frau Brandt, as Maria Dolores came into her sitting-room, a vast, square, bare room, with a marble floor and a painted ceiling, with Venetian blinds to shelter it from the sun, and a bitter-sweet smell, as of rosemary or I know not what other aromatic herb, upon its cool air.

"Oh? You saw us?" said Maria Dolores, answering the question with question.

"Him I have seen many times—every day for a week at least," said Frau Brandt. "But I never before saw you talking with him. Who is he?" She was a small, brown, square-built, black-haired, homely-featured old woman, in a big, round starched white cap and a flowing black silk gown. She sat in an uncushioned oaken armchair by the window, with some white knitting in her bony, blunt-fingered

brown hands, and tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles on her nose. But the spectacles couldn't hide the goodness or the soundness or the sweetness that looked forth from her motherly old honest brown eyes.

"He is a young man who lives *en pension* at the presbytery," said Maria Dolores, "a young Englishman."

"So?" said Frau Brandt. "What is his name?"

"I don't know," said Maria Dolores, with disengagement real or feigned. "His Christian name, I believe, is John."

"But his family name?" persisted Frau Brandt.

"It is probably Brown, Jones, or Robinson," said Maria Dolores. "Or it may even be Black, Smith, or Johnson. Most Englishmen are named one or the other."

"So?" said Frau Brandt. "But is it prudent or seemly for you to talk familiarly with a young man whose name is unknown to you?"

"Why not?" asked Maria Dolores, raising her eyebrows, as if surprised. "He seems a very harmless young man. I don't think he will eat me. And he is English,—and I like

English people. And he is intelligent,—his conversation amuses me. And he has nice easy, impetuous manners,—so different from the formality and restraint of Austrian young men. What can his name matter?"

"But"—Frau Brandt looked up impressively over her spectacles, and her voice was charged with gravity, for she was about to ask a question to the Teutonic mind of quite supreme importance—"but is he noble?" It was to her what—nay, more than what—the question, "Is he respectable?" would have been to an Englishwoman.

Maria Dolores laughed.

"Oh, no," she said. "At least I have every reason to believe not, and I devoutly hope not. He belongs I expect to what they call in England the middle class. He has an uncle who is a farmer."

Frau Brandt's good old brown eyes showed her profoundly shocked, and expressed profound reprehension.

"But you were speaking with him familiarly —you were speaking with him almost as an equal," she pronounced in bated accents, in accents of consternation.

Again Maria Dolores laughed.

"True," she assented gaily, "and that is exactly what I couldn't do if he *were* noble. Then I should have to remember our respective positions. But where the difference of rank is so great, one can talk familiarly without fear. *Ça n'engage à rien.*"

Frau Brandt nodded her head, for full half a minute, with many meanings; she nodded it now up and down, and now shook it sidewise.

"I do not like it," she said, at last. "Your brother would not like it. It is not becoming. Well, thanks be to Heaven, he is only English."

"Oh, of course," agreed Maria Dolores, "if he were Austrian, it would be entirely different."

"But is it fair to the young man himself?" pursued Frau Brandt. "Is he aware that he is hobanobbing with a Serene Highness? You treat him as an equal. What if he should fall in love with you?"

"What indeed! But he won't," laughed Maria Dolores, possibly with a mental reservation.

"Who can tell?" said Frau Brandt. "His

eyes, when he looked at you, had an expression. But there is a greater danger still. You are both at the dangerous age. He is good-looking. What if your heart should become interested in him?"

"Oh, in that case," answered Maria Dolores, lightly, her chin a little in the air, "I should marry him—if he asked me."

"What!" cried Frau Brandt, half rising from her chair.

"Yes," said Maria Dolores, cheerfully unexcited. "He is a man of breeding and education, even if he isn't noble. If I loved a man, I shouldn't give one thought to his birth. I'm tired of all our Austrian insistence upon birth, upon birth and quarterings and precedencies. If ever I love, I shall love some one just for what he is, for what God has made him, and for nothing else. It wouldn't matter if his father were a cobbler—if I loved him, I'd marry him." Her chin higher in the air, she had every appearance of meaning what she said.

Frau Brandt had sunk back in her chair, and was nodding her white-capped old head again.

"Oh, my child, my child," she grieved. "Will you never rid your fancy of these high-flown, unpractical, romantic whimsies? It all comes of reading poetry." She herself, good woman, read little but her prayers.

"Oh, my dear true Heart," responded Maria Dolores, laughing. She crossed the room, and placed her hand affectionately upon Frau Brandt's shoulder. "My dearest old Nurse! Do not distress yourself. This is not yet a question of actuality. Let us not cry before we are hurt." And she stooped, and kissed her nurse's brown old brow.

But afterwards she stood looking with great pensiveness out of the window, stood so for a long while; and I fancy there was a softer glow than ever in her soft-glowing eyes, and perhaps a livelier rose in her pale-rose cheeks.

"What are you thinking so deeply about?" Frau Brandt asked by-and-by.

Maria Dolores woke with a little start, and turned from the window, and laughed again.

"Oh, thinking about my cobbler's son, of course," she said.

VI

Annunziata, seeking him to announce that supper was ready, found John, seated in his chamber of dead ladies, his arms folded, his legs crossed, his eyes fixed, a frown upon his prone brow; his spirit apparently rapt in a brown study.

"Eh! Prospero!" she called.

Whereat he came to himself, glanced up, glanced round, changed his posture, and finally, rising, blew his preoccupations from him in a deep, deep sigh.

"Oh, what a sigh!" marvelled Annunziata, making big eyes. "What are you sighing so hard for?"

John looked at her, and smiled.

"Sighing for my miller's daughter, my dear," he said.

And, as he followed her to the presbytery, he sang softly to himself—

My Friend Prospero

"*It is the miller's daughter,*
And she is grown so dear, so dear,
That I would be the jewel
That trembles in her ear."

PART FIFTH

My Friend Prospero

I

It was Sunday. It was early morning. It was raining,—a fine quiet, determined rain, that blurred the lower reaches of the valley, and entirely hid the mountain-tops, so that one found it hard not to doubt a little whether they were still there. Near at hand the garden was as if a thin web of silver had been cast over it, pale and dim, where wet surfaces reflected the diffused daylight. And just across the Rampio, on the olive-clad hillside that rose abruptly from its brink, rather an interesting process was taking place,—the fabrication of clouds, no less. The hillside, with its rondure of blue-grey foliage, would lie for a moment quite bare and clear; then, at some high point, a mist would begin to form, would appear indeed to issue from the earth, as smoke from a subterranean fire, white smoke with pearly shadows; would thicken and spread

out; would draw together and rise in an irregular spiral column, curling, swaying, poising, as if uncertain what to do next; and at last, all at once making up its mind, (how like a younker or a prodigal!), would go sailing away, straggling away, amorphous, on a puff of wind, leaving the hillside clear again;—till, presently, the process would recommence *da capo*.

John and Annunziata, seated together on a marble bench in the shelter of the great cloister, with its faded frescoes, at the north-eastern extremity of the castle buildings, had been watching this element-play for some minutes in silence. But by-and-by Annunziata spoke.

"What makes the cloud come out of the hill like that?" she asked, her eyes anxiously questioning his. "I have seen it happen many times, but I could never understand it. There cannot be a fire underneath?"

"If *you* can't understand it, Mistress Wisdom," responded John, smiling on her, "you surely mustn't expect a featherpate like me to. Between ourselves, I don't believe any one can really understand it, though there's a variety of the human species called scientists who might pretend they could. It's all a part of that great

scheme of miracles by which God's world goes on, Nature, which nobody can really understand in the very least. All that the chaps called scientists can really do is to observe and more or less give names to the miracles. They can't explain 'em."

"It is great pleasure to watch such things," said Annunziata. "It is a great blessing to be allowed to see a miracle performed with your own eyes."

"So it is," agreed John. "And if you keep your eyes well open, there's not a minute of the livelong day when you mayn't see one."

"It is very strange," said Annunziata, "but when the sun shines, then I love the sunny weather, and am glad that it does not rain. Yet when it does rain, then I find that I love the rain too, that I love it just as much as the sun,—it is so fresh, it smells so good, the raindrops are so pretty, and they make such a pretty sound where they fall, and the grey light is so pleasant."

"Our loves," said John, "are always very strange. Love is the rummest miracle of them all. It is even more difficult to account for than the formation of clouds on the hillside."

"We love the things that give us pleasure," said Annunziata.

"And the people, sometimes, who give us pain," said John.

"We love the people, first of all, who are related to us," said Annunziata, "and then the people we see a great deal of—just as I love, first of all, my uncle, and then you and Marcella the cook."

"Who brings in the inevitable veal," said John. "Thank you, Honeymouth." He bowed and laughed, while Annunziata's grave eyes wondered what he was laughing at. "But it isn't every one," he pointed out, "who has your solid and well-balanced little head-piece. It isn't every one who keeps his love so neatly docketed, or so sanely submitted to the sway of reason. Some of us love first of all people who aren't related to us in the remotest degree, and people we've seen hardly anything of and know next to nothing about."

Annunziata deprecatingly shook her head.

"It is foolish to love people we know nothing about," she declared, in her deep voice, and looked a very sage delivering judgment.

"True enough," said John. "But what

would you have ? Some of us are born to folly, as the sparks fly upward. You see, there's a mighty difference between love and love. There's the love which is affection, there's the love which is cupboard-love, and there's the love which is just simply love-love and nothing else. The first, as you have truly observed, has its roots in consanguinity or association, the second in a lively hope of future comfits, and either is sufficiently explicable. But the third has its roots apparently in mere haphazard and causelessness, and isn't explicable by any means whatsoever, and yet is far and away the violentest of the three. It falls as the lightning from the clouds, and strikes whom it will. Though I mix my metaphors fearlessly, like a man, I trust, with your feminine intuition, you follow me ? "

"No," said Annunziata, without compunction, her eyes on the distance. "I don't know what you mean."

"Thank Heaven you don't, pray Heaven you never may," said her inconsequential friend. "For love-love is a plague. You meet a person, for example, in a garden. You know nothing whatever about her, not even her name,

though you fear it may be Schmidt. You meet her not more than half a dozen times all told. And suddenly one morning you wake up to discover that she has become to you the person of first importance in the world. She is practically a total stranger to you, she's of a different nationality, a different rank, yet she's infinitely the most precious and important person in the world. When you're absent from her you can do nothing but think of her, gloating with throes of aromatic pain over the memory of your last meeting with her, longing with soul-hunger for your next. The merest flutter of her gown, modulation of her voice, glance of her eye, will throw your heart into a palpitation. You look in the direction of the house that she inhabits, and you feel the emotions of a Peri looking at the gate of Eden. And it gives you the strangest sort of strange joy to talk about her, though of course you take pains to talk about her in veiled terms, obliquely, so that your listener shan't guess *whom* you are talking about. In short, she is the be-all and the end-all of your existence,—and you don't even know her name, though you fear it may be Schmidt."

He lolled back at ease on the marble bench,

and twirled his yellow-red moustaches, fancy free.

"But you do know her name," said Annunziata, simply, in her deepest voice, holding him with a gaze, lucent and serious, that seemed almost reproachful. "Her name is Maria Dolores."

The thing was tolerably unexpected. What wonder if it put my hero out of countenance? His attitude grew rigid, his pink skin three shades pinker; his blue eyes stared at her, startled. So for a second; then he relaxed, and laughed, laughed long and heartily, perhaps a little despitefully too, at his own expense. . . . But he must try, if he might, to repair the mischief.

"My poor child," he said, resting his hand on her curls, and gently smoothing them. "You are what the French call an *enfant terrible*. You are what the English call a deuced sharp little pickle. And I must try, if I can, without actually lying, to persuade you that you are utterly mistaken, utterly and absolutely mistaken,"—he raised his voice, for greater convincingness,—"and that her name is nothing distantly resembling the name that you have

spoken, and that in fact her name is Mrs. Harris, and that in fine there is no such person, and that I was merely talking hypothetically, in abstractions ; I must draw a herring across the trail, I must raise a dust, and throw a lot of it into your amazingly clear-sighted little eyes. Now, is it definitely impressed upon you that her name is *not*—the thrice-adorable name you mentioned ? "

"I thought it was," answered Annunziata. "I am sorry it is not." And then she dismissed the subject. "See, it is raining harder. See how the rain comes down in long strings of beads,—see how it is like a network of long strings of glass beads falling through the air. When the rain comes down like that, it means that after the rain stops it will be very hot. To-morrow it will be very hot."

The bell in the clock-tower tolled out seven solemn strokes ; then the lighter-toned and nimbler-tongued bell of the church began to ring.

"Come," peremptorily said Annunziata, jumping up. "Mass."

She held out her hand, took John's, and, like a mother, led the meek and unquestioning young man to his duties.

II

Of course there are no such heretical inventions as pews in the parish church of Sant' Alessina. You sit upon orthodox rush-bottomed chairs, you kneel upon orthodox bare stones. But at the Epistle side of the altar, at an elevation of perhaps a yard from the pavement, there is a recess in the wall, enclosed by a marble balustrade, and hung with faded red curtains, which looks, I'm afraid, a good deal like a private box at a theatre, and is in fact the tribune reserved for the masters of the Castle. (In former days those masters were the Sforzas. So, from this tribune, the members of that race of iron and blood, of fierceness and of guile, have assisted at the mystical sacrifice of the Lamb of God !) Heretofore, during John's residence at the presbytery, the tribune had stood vacant. To-day it was occupied by Maria Dolores and Frau Brandt. Maria Dolores, instead of

wearing a hat, had adopted the ancient and beautiful use of draping a long veil of black lace over her dark hair.

John knelt in the middle of the church, in the thick of the ragged, dirty, unsavoury villagers. When Mass was over, he returned to the cloisters, and there, face to face, he met the lady of his dreams.

She graciously inclined her head.

"Good morning," she said, smiling, in a voice that seemed to him full of morning freshness.

"Good morning," he responded, wondering whether she could hear the tremor of his heart. "Though, in honest truth, it's rather a bad morning, isn't it?" he submitted, posing his head at an angle, dubious and reflective, that seemed to raise the question to a level of philosophic import.

"Oh, with these cloisters, one shouldn't complain," said she, glancing indicatively round. "One can still be out of doors, and yet not get the wetting one deserves. And the view is so fine, and these faded old frescoes are so droll."

"Yes," said he, his wits, for the instant, in a

state of suspended animation. "The view is fine, the frescoes are droll."

She looked as if she were thinking about something.

"Don't you find it," she asked, after a moment, with the slightest bepuzzled drawing together of her eyebrows, "a trifle unpleasant, hearing Mass from where you do?"

John looked blank.

"Unpleasant? No. Why?" he asked.

"I should think it might be disagreeable to be hemmed in and elbowed by those extraordinarily ragged and dirty people," she explained. "It's a pity they shouldn't clean themselves up a little before coming to church."

"Ah, yes," he assented, "a little cleaning up wouldn't hurt them; that's very certain. But," he set forth, in extenuation, "it's not the custom of the country, and the fact that it isn't has its good significance, as well as its bad. It's one of the many signs of how genuinely democratic and popular the Church is in Italy,—as it ought to be everywhere. It is here essentially the Church of the people, the Church of the poor. It is the one place where the poorest man, in all his rags, and with the soil of his work upon

him, feels perfectly at ease, perfectly at home, perfectly equal to the richest. It is the one place where a reeking market-woman, with her basket on her arm, will feel at liberty to take her place beside the great lady, in her furs and velvets, and even to ask her, with a nudge, to move up and make room. That is as it should be, isn't it?"

"No doubt, no doubt," agreed Maria Dolores, beginning to pace backwards and forwards over the lichen-stained marble pavement, (stained as by the hand of an artist, in wavy veins of yellow or pale-green, with here and there little rosettes of scarlet), while John kept beside her. "All the same, I should not like to kneel quite in the very heart of the crowd, as you do."

"You are a delicate and sensitive woman," he reminded her. "I am a man, and a moderately tough one. However, I must admit that until rather recently I had exactly your feeling. But I got a lesson." He broke off, and gave a vague little laugh, vaguely rueful, as at a not altogether pleasant reminiscence.

"What was the lesson?" she asked.

"Well," said he, "if you care to know, it was this. The first time that I attended Mass

here, desiring to avoid the people, I sought out a far corner of the church, behind a pillar, where there was no one. But as soon as I had got myself well established there, up hobbled a deformed and lame old man, and plumped himself down beside me, so close that our coat-sleeves touched. I think he was the most repulsive-looking old man I have ever seen; he was certainly the dirtiest, the grimiest, and his rags were extravagantly foul. I will spare you a more circumstantial portrait. And all through Mass I was sick with disgust and sore with resentment. Why should he come and rub his coat-sleeve against mine, when there was room in plenty for him elsewhere? The next time I went to church, I chose a different corner, as remote as might be from my former one; but again, no sooner was I well installed, than, lo and behold, the same unspeakable old man limped up and knelt with me, cheek by jowl. And so, if you can believe it, the next time, and so the next. It didn't matter where I placed myself, there he was sure to place himself too. You will suppose that, apart from my annoyance, I was vastly perplexed. Why should he pursue me so? Who was he?

What was he after? And for enlightenment I addressed myself to Annunziata. 'Who is the hideous old man who always kneels beside me?' I asked her. She had not noticed any one kneeling beside me, she said; she had noticed, on the contrary, that I always knelt alone, at a distance. 'Well,' said I, 'keep your eyes open to-day, and you will see the man I mean.' So we went to Mass, and sure enough, no sooner had I found a secluded place, than my old friend appeared and joined me, dirtier and more hideous and if possible more deformed than ever."

"Yes?" said Maria Dolores, with interest, as he paused.

"When we came out of church, I asked Annunziata who he was," continued John. "And she said that though she had kept her eyes open, according to my injunction, she had failed to see any one kneeling beside me—that, on the contrary, she had seen me," he concluded, with an insouciance that was plainly assumed for its dramatic value, "kneeling alone, at a distance from every one."

Maria Dolores' face was white. She frowned her mystification.

"What!" she exclaimed, in a half-frightened voice.

"That is precisely the ejaculation that fell from my own lips at the time," said John. "Then I gave her a minute description of the old man, in all his ugliness. And then she administered my lesson to me."

"Yes? What was it?" questioned Maria Dolores, her interest acute.

"Speaking in that oracular vein of hers, her eyes very big, her face very grave, she assured me that my horrible old man had no objective existence. She informed me cheerfully and calmly that he was an image of my own soul, as it appeared, corrupted and aged and deformed by the sins of a lifetime, to God and to the Saints. And she added that he was sent to punish me for my pride in thinking myself different to the common people, and in seeking to hold myself aloof. Since then," John brought his anecdote to a term, "I have always knelt in the body of the church, and I have never again seen my Doppelgänger."

Maria Dolores was silent for a little. They had come to the southern end of the cloisters, where the buttresses of the Castle walls, all

shaggy-mantled in a green overgrowth of creepers, fall precipitously away, down the steep face of a natural cliff. They stopped here, and stood looking off. The rain had held up, though the valley was still misty with its vapours. Whiffs of velvety air, warm and sweet, blew in their faces, lightly stirred the dark hair about her brow, and, catching the flowery edge of her black lace mantilla, set it fluttering.

"That is a very good story," she said, by-and-by, with a sober glance, behind which there was the glint of laughter. "In view of it, however, I suppose there will be no use in my delivering a message I am charged with for you from my friend Frau Brandt."

"Oh?" questioned John. "What message?"

"Frau Brandt has received from the owner of the Castle the privilege of hearing Mass from the tribune; and she wished me to invite you in her name hereafter to hear Mass from there with us. But I suppose, in view of your 'lesson,' that is an invitation which you will decline?" The glint of laughter shone brighter in her eyes, and her mouth had a tiny pucker, amiably derisive.

John looked at her, his blue eyes bold.

"That is an invitation which I am terribly tempted to accept," he said, in a voice of unconcealed emotion, of patent meaning; and beneath his bold gaze, her dark eyes dropped, while I think a blush faintly swept her cheeks. "And first of all," he added, "pray express to Frau Brandt my grateful thanks for it—and let me thank you also for your kindness in conveying it. If, in spite of my temptation, I *don't* accept it, that will be for a very special reason, and one quite unconnected with my 'lesson.'"

Maria Dolores probably knew her danger. She turned, and began to walk backwards, towards the point where you can pass from the cloisters, through the great porte-cochère, into the garden, and so on to the pavilion beyond the clock. She probably knew her danger; but she was human, but she was a woman. Besides, she had reached the porte-cochère, and thus commanded a clear means of escape. So, coming to a standstill here, "What is the very special reason?" she asked, in a low voice, keeping her eyes from his.

His were bolder than ever. Infinite admiration of her burned in them, infinite delight in

her, desire for her ; at the same time a kind of angry hoplessness darkened them, and a kind of bitter amusement, as of one amused at his own sad plight.

"I wish I were rich," he exclaimed, irritably, between his teeth.

"Oh ? Is *that* the very special reason ?" asked she, with two notes of laughter.

"No," said he, "but it has a connection with it. You see, I'm in love."

"Yes," said she. "I remember your telling me so."

"Well, I wish I were rich," said he. "Then I might pluck up courage to ask the woman I love to be my wife."

"Money isn't everything here below," said she. "I have your own word for that."

"What else counts," said he, "when you wish to ask a woman to marry you ?"

"Oh, many things," said she. "Difference of rank, for example."

"That wouldn't count with me," said the democratic fellow, handsomely. "I shouldn't give two thoughts to differences of rank."

Maria Dolores smiled—at her secret reflections, I suppose.

"But poverty puts it out of all question," John moodily went on. "I couldn't ask a woman to come and share with me an income of sixpence a week. Especially as I have grounds for believing that she's in rather affluent circumstances herself. Oh, I wish I were rich!" He repeated this aspiration in a groan.

"Poor, poor young man!" she commiserated him, while her eyes, which she held perseveringly averted, were soft with sympathy and gay with mirth. "When do you begin your gardening?"

"Oh, don't mock me!" he cried, with an imploring gesture. "You know, joking apart, that it's child's play for a man of my age, with no profession and no special talent, to fancy he can turn to and earn money. I might, if I made supernatural exertions, and if Fortune went out of her way to favour me, add a maximum of another sixpence to my weekly budget. No, there's never a hope for me on sea or land. I must e'en bear it, though I cannot grin withal."

"Ah, well," said Maria Dolores, to comfort him, "these attacks, I have read, are often as

short as they are sharp. Let us trust you'll soon rally from this one. How long have they generally lasted in the past?"

John's face grew dark with upbraiding; the sea-blue of his eyes, the gold of his hair and beard, the pink of his complexion visibly grew dark.

"You are so needlessly unkind," he said, "that you don't deserve to hear the true answer to your question."

She studied the half-obliterated fresco on the wall beside her.

"All the same," said he, "you *shall* hear it. If falling in love were my habit, no doubt I shouldn't take it so hard. But the simple truth, though I am thirty years old, is that I have never before felt so much as a heart-flutter for any woman. And, since you cite your reading, *I* have read that a fire which may merely singe the surface of green wood, will entirely consume the dry."

She continued to study the ancient painting. Her fingers were playing with the ends of her lace veil.

"Besides," he went on, "if I had been in love a dozen times, it wouldn't signify. For I

should have been in love with ordinary usual human women. They're the only sort I ever met—till I met her. She's of a totally different order—as distinct from them as . . . What shall I say? Oh, as unlike them as starfire is unlike dull clay. Starfire—starfire—the wonderful, high, white-burning starfire of her spirit, that's the thing that strikes you most in her. It shines through her. It shines in her eyes, it shines in her hair, her adorable, soft, dark, warm and fragrant hair; it shines in her very voice; it shines in every word she utters, even in the unkindest."

"Dear me! what an alarmingly refulgent person you depict!" laughed Maria Dolores, her eyes still on the wall.

"I have no gift for word-painting," said John; "though I doubt if the words are yet invented that could fitly paint my lady. She grows in beauty day by day. It's a literal fact—every fresh time I see her, she is perceptibly more lovely than the last, more love-compelling in her loveliness. But 'tis a thing unpaintable, indescribable, as indescribable as the perfume of a rose. Oh, why haven't I five thousand a year?"

"You harp so persistently upon your desire for money," suggested Maria Dolores, "one might infer she was a commodity, to be bought and sold. You begin at the wrong end. What good would five or fifty thousand a year do you, if you had not begun by winning her love?"

"No, I begin at the proper end, worse luck," John answered, glooming. "For, without a decent income, I have no right even to try to win her love."

"And that being so," questioned Maria Dolores, "I hope you conscientiously avoid her society, or, when you meet, make yourself consistently disagreeable to her?"

"There's no need for such precautions," John replied. "There's no fear for her. She regards me as a casual and passing acquaintance. So I make myself no more disagreeable than I am by nature. And if I avoided her society, (which I am far from doing), it would be not for her sake, but for my own. For, though her society is to me a kind of anticipation of the joys of Heaven, yet when I leave it and find myself alone, the reaction is dreary in the superlative degree; and the fear, which

perpetually haunts me (for I know nothing of her plans), lest I shall never see her again, is agonizing as a foretaste of—Heaven's antipode. Oh, I love her!"

He took, involuntarily I dare say, a step in her direction. She retreated under the vaulting of the *porte-cochère*.

"You seem," she commented, "to be getting a good deal of emotional experience,—which doubtless some day you will find of value. Why not, instead of gardener, embark as novelist or poet? Here is material you could then turn to account."

"Ah, there you are," he complained, piteously, "mocking me again. Ah, well, if you must have your laugh, have it, and welcome. A man can learn to take the bitter with the sweet."

"To spare you that discomfort," said she, moving deeper into the archway, while John's face fell, "I will bid you good-bye. I am to report, then, that you decline my friend's invitation with thanks?"

"With my most grateful thanks," he was able intensively to rejoin, in spite of his dismay at the imminence of her departure.

"And for a very special reason?" she harked

back, now, suddenly, for the first time since they had touched thin ice, giving him a glance.

It was the fleetingest of fleeting glances, it was merry and ironic, but there was something in it which brought a flame to his blue eyes.

"For the very special reason," he answered, with vehemence, "that I fear the presence near me of—" He held his breath for a second, the flame in his eyes enveloping her; then, with an abrupt change of tone and mien, he ended, "—of Frau Brandt might distract my attention from the sermon."

She laughed, and said, "Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said John. And when she was halfway through the tunnel-like passage, "I suppose you know you are leaving me to a day as barren as the Desert of Sahara?" he called after her.

"Oh, who can tell what a day may bring forth?" called she, but without looking back.

For a long while John's faculties were kept busy, trying to determine whether that was a promise, a menace, or a mere word in the air.

III

"Rain before seven, clear before eleven," is as true, or as untrue, in Lombardy as it is in other parts of the world. The rain had held up, and now, in that spirited phrase of Corvo's, "here came my lord the Sun," splendidly putting the clouds to flight, or chaining them, transfigured, to his chariot-wheels; clothing the high snow-peaks in a roseate glory, (that seemed somehow, I don't know why, to accent their solitude and their remoteness); flooding the valley with ethereal amber; turning the swollen Rampio to a river of fire: while the nearer hillsides, the olive woods, the trees in the Castle garden, glistened with a million million crystals, and the petals of the flowers were crystal-tipped; while the breath of the earth rose in long streamers of luminous incense, and the sky gleamed with every tender, every brilliant, tint of blue, from the blue of pale forgetmenots to the blue of larkspur.

John, contemplating this spectacle, (and thinking of Maria Dolores? revolving still her cryptic valediction?), all at once, as his eye rested on the shimmer at the valley's end which he knew to be the lake, lifted up his hand and clapped his brow. "By Jove," he muttered, "if I wasn't within an ace of clean forgetting!" The sight of the lake had fortunately put him in mind that he was engaged to-day to lunch with Lady Blanchemain at Roccadoro.

He found her ladyship, in a frock all concentric whirls of crisp white ruffles, vigorously wielding a fan, and complaining of the heat. (Indeed, as Annunziata had predicted, it had grown markedly warmer.) "I shall fly away, if this continues; I shall fly straight to town, and set my house in order for the season. When do *you* come?" she asked, smiling on him from her benign old eyes.

"I don't come," answered John. "I rather like town in autumn and winter, when it's too dark to see its ugliness, but save me from it in the clear light of summer."

"Fudge," said Lady Blanchemain. "London's the most beautiful capital in Europe—it's

grandiose. And it's the only place where there are any people."

"Yes," said John, "but, as at Nice and Homburg, too many of them are English. And there's a liberal scattering, I've heard, of Jews?"

"Oh, Jews are all right—when they aren't Jewy," said Lady Blanchemain, with magnanimity. "I know some very nice ones. I was rather hoping you would be a feature of my Sunday afternoons."

"I'm not a society man," said John. "I've no aptitude myself for patronizing or toadying, and I don't particularly enjoy being patronized or toadied to."

"Is that the beginning and end of social life in England?" Lady Blanchemain inquired, delicately sarcastic.

"As I have seen it, yes," asseverated John. "The beginning, end, and middle of social life in England, as in Crim-Tartary, is worship of the longest pigtail,—a fetichism sometimes grosser, sometimes subtler, sometimes deliberate, often unconscious and instinctive. Every one you meet is aware that his pigtail is either longer or shorter than yours, and accordingly,

more or less subtly, grossly, unconsciously or deliberately, swaggers or bends the knee. It's a state of things I've tried in vain to find diverting."

"It's a state of things you'll find prevailing pretty well in all places where the human species breeds," said Lady Blanchemain. "The only difference will be a question of what constitutes the pigtail. And are you, then, remaining at Sant' Alessina?"

"For the present," answered John.

"Until—?" she questioned.

"Oh, well, until she sends me away, or leaves herself," said he, "and so my fool's paradise achieves its inevitable end."

Lady Blanchemain laughed—a long, quiet laugh of amused contentment.

"Come in to luncheon," she said, putting her soft white hand upon his arm, "and tell me all about it." And when they were established at her table, a round table, gay with flowers, in a window at the far end of the cool, terazza-paved, stucco-columned dining-room of the Hotel Victoria, "Why do you call it a fool's paradise?" she asked.

"Well, you see, I'm in love," said he.

"You really are?" she doubted, with sprightliness, looking gleeful.

"All too really," he assured her, in a sinking voice.

"What an old witch I was!" mused she, with satisfaction. "Accept my heart-felt felicitations." She beamed upon him.

"I should prefer your condolences," said he, in a voice from the depths.

"*Allons donc!* Cheer up," laughed she, dallying with her bliss. "Men have died, and worms have eaten them, but not for love."

"I wonder," said John. "That is a statement, it seems to me, which would be the better for some proving."

"At all events," said she, "you, for one, are not dead yet."

"No," admitted he; "though I could almost wish I was."

"Do you mean to say she has definitely rejected you?" she demanded, alarmed.

"Fortune has spared her that necessity," said John. "I haven't asked her, and I never shall. I haven't any money."

"Pooh! Is that all?" scoffed her ladyship, relieved. "You have prospects."

"Remote ones—the remoter the better. I won't count on dead men's shoes," said John.

"What is it your little fortune-teller at the Castle calls you?" asked Lady Blanchemain, shrewdly, her dark old eyebrows up.

"She calls me *lucus a non lucendo*," was John's quick riposte; and the lady laughed.

But in a moment she pulled a straight face. "I seriously counsel you to have more faith," she said. "Go home and ask her to marry you; and if she accepts,—you'll see. Money will come. Besides, your rank and your prospective rank are assets which you err in not adding to the balance. Go home, and propose to her."

"'Twould do no good," said John, dejectedly. "She regards me with imperturbable indifference. I've made the fieriest avowals to her, and she's never turned a hair."

Lady Blanchemain looked bewildered. "You've made avowals—?" she falteringly echoed.

"I should rather think so," John affirmed. "Indirect ones, of course, and I hope inoffensive, but fiery as live coals. In the third person, you know. I've given her two and two; she has,

you may be sure, enough skill in mathematics to put 'em together."

"And she never turned a hair?" the lady marvelled.

"She jeered at me, she mocked me, she laughed and rode away," said he.

"She's probably in love with you," said Lady Blanchemain. "If a woman will listen, if a woman will laugh! If you don't propose to her now, having ensnared her young affections, you'll be something worse than the wicked nobleman of song and story."

"Oh, well," John responded, conciliatory, "I dare say some of these days a proposal will slip out when I least intend it. So I shall have done the honourable thing — and I'm sure I can trust her to play fair and say me nay."

Lady Blanchemain slowly shook her head. "I'm glad you're not *my* lover," she devoutly murmured, plying her fan.

"Oh, but I am," cried John, with a bow, and an admiring flash of the eyes.

Her soft old face lighted up; then it took on an expression of resolution, and she set her strong old jaws.

"In that case," she remarked, "you will have the less reluctance in granting a favour I'm about to ask you."

"What's the favour?" said John, in a tone of readiness.

"I want you to buy a pig in a poke," said she.

"Oh?" questioned he.

"Yes," said she. "I want you to make me a promise blindfold. I want you to promise in the dark that you will do something. What it is that you're to do you're not to know till the time comes. Will you promise?"

"Dearest lady," said the trustful young man, "I'm perfectly confident that you would never ask me to do anything that I couldn't do with profit to myself. Buy a pig in a poke? From you, without a moment's hesitation. Of course I promise."

"Bravo, bravo," applauded Lady Blanchemain, glowing at her easy triumph. "In a few days you'll receive a letter. That will tell you what it is you're pledged to. And now, to reward you, come with me to my sitting-room, and I will make you a little present."

When they had reached her sitting-room

(dim and cool, with its half-drawn blinds and the straw-coloured linen covers of its furniture), she put into his hands a small case of shagreen, small and hard, and at the edges white with age.

"Go to the window and see what's in it," she said.

And obeying, "By Jove, what a stunner!" he exclaimed. The case contained a ring, a light circle of gold, set with a ruby, surrounded by a row of diamonds,—for my part, I think the most beautiful ruby I have ever seen. It was as big as a hazel-nut, or almost; it was cut, with innumerable facets, in the shape of a heart; and it quivered and burned, and flowed and rippled, liquidly, with the purest, limpidest red fire.

"'Tis the spirit of a rose, distilled and crystallized," said Lady Blanchemain.

"'Tis a drop of liquid light," said John. "But why do you give it to me? I can't wear it. I don't think I ought to accept it."

"Nobody asks you to wear it," said Lady Blanchemain. "It's a woman's ring, of course. But as for accepting it, you need have no scruples. It's an old Blanchemain gem, that was in the family a hundred years before I came

into it. It's properly an heirloom, and you're the heir. I give it to you for a purpose. Should you ever become engaged, I desire you to place it upon the finger of the adventurous woman."

IV

UNDER a gnarled old olive, by the river's brim, Annunziata sat on the turf, head bowed, so that her curls fell in a tangle all about her cheeks, and gazed fixedly into the green waters, the laughing, dancing, purling waters, green, and, where the sun reached them, shot with seams and cleavages of light, like fluorspar. In the sun-flecked, shadow-dappled grass near by, violets tried to hide themselves, but were betrayed by their truant sweetness. The waters purled, a light breeze rustled the olive-leaves, and birds were singing loud and wild, as birds will after rain.

Maria Dolores, coming down the path that followed the river's windings, stood for a minute, and watched her small friend without speaking. But at last she called out, "*Ciao*, Annunziata. Are you dreaming dreams and seeing visions?"

Annunziata started and looked up. "Sh-h!"

she whispered, with an admonitory gesture. She stole a wary glance roundabout, and then spoke as one fearful of being overheard. "I was listening to the music of Divopan," she said.

Maria Dolores, who had come closer, appeared at a loss. "The music of—what?" she questioned.

"Sh-h!" whispered Annunziata. "I would not dare to say it aloud. The music of Divopan."

"Divopan?" Maria Dolores puzzled, compliantly guarding her tone. "What is that?"

"Divo—Pan," said Annunziata, dividing the word in two, and always with an air of excessive caution.

But Maria Dolores helplessly shook her head. "I'm afraid I don't understand. What is Divo —Pan?"

"Don't you know what a *divo* is?" asked Annunziata, her clear grey eyes surprised.

"Oh, a *divo?*" said Maria Dolores, getting a glimmer of light. "Ah, yes, a divo is a saint, I think?"

"Not exactly," Annunziata discriminated, "but something like one. The saints, you

see, are always very good, and *divi* are sometimes bad. But they are powerful, like saints. They can do anything they wish. Divo Pan is the divo who makes all the music that you hear out of doors,—the music of the wind and the water and the bird-songs. But you must be careful never to praise his music aloud, lest Divo Apollone should hear you. He is the divo that makes all the music you hear on instruments—on harps and violins and pianos. He is very jealous of Divo Pan, and if he hears you praising him, will do something to you. You know what he did to King Mida, don't you?"

"What did he do?" asked Maria Dolores.

Annunziata stole another wary glance about.

"Once upon a time," she recounted, always in her lowest voice, "many years ago, hundreds of years ago, the King of this country was named Mida. And he loved very much the music of Divo Pan. He loved to sit by the river here, and to listen to the music of the water, and of the leaves, and of the birds. I love to do it too, and I think he was quite right. But one day, in his house, there came a musician with a harp, and began to play to

him. And the King listened for a while, and then he told the musician to stop. 'Your music is very good,' he said, 'but now I am going into the fields and by the river, where I can hear a music I like better.' But the musician with the harp was really Divo Apollone himself, disguised. And this made him very angry and jealous. And to punish King Mida he changed his ears to long hairy ears, like an ass's. So, if you love the music of Divo Pan, you must be very careful not to let Divo Apollone hear you praise it, or he will do something to you."

And to drive home this application of her theme, she held up a warning finger.

Maria Dolores had listened, smiling. Now she gave a gay little laugh, and then for a moment mused. "That is a very curious bit of history," she said, in the end. "How ever did it come to your knowledge?"

Annunziata shrugged. "Oh," she answered, "everybody knows that. I have known it for years. My grandmother who lived in Milan told it to me. Doesn't the water look cool and pleasant?" was her abrupt digression, as she returned her gaze to the Rampio. "When

it is hot like this, I should like to lie down in the water, and go to sleep. Wouldn't you ?"

"I'm not so sure," said Maria Dolores. "I should rather fear I might be drowned."

"Oh, but that wouldn't hurt," said Annunziata, with security. "To be drowned in such beautiful green water, among all those beams of light, would be nice."

"Perhaps you are not aware," said Maria Dolores, "that when people are drowned they die ?"

"Oh, yes, I know that," said Annunziata. "But"—she raised calm pellucid eyes—"wouldn't you like to die ?"

"Certainly not," said Maria Dolores, a shadow on her face.

"I would," said Annunziata, stoutly. "It must be lovely to die."

"Hush," Maria Dolores rebuked her, frowning. "You must not say such things."

"Why not say them, if you think them ?" asked Annunziata.

"You mustn't think them either," said Maria Dolores.

"Oh, I can't help thinking them," said Annunziata, with a movement. "It surely

must be lovely to die and go to Heaven. If I were perfectly sure I should go to Heaven, I would shut my eyes and die now. But I should probably have to wait some time in Purgatory. And, of course, I might go to Hell."

Maria Dolores' face was full of trouble. "You must not talk like that," she said. "You must not. It is wicked of you."

"Then, if I am wicked, I *should* go to Hell?" inquired Annunziata, looking alertly up.

Maria Dolores looked about her, looked across the river, down the valley, as one in distress scanning the prospect for aid. "Of course you would not," she said. "My dear child, can't we find something else to talk of?"

"Do you think I shall have a very long and hard Purgatory?" asked Annunziata.

Maria Dolores threw a despairing glance at the horizon.

"No, no, dear," she answered uneasily. "You will have a very short and gentle one. Anyhow, you'll not have to consider that for years to come. Now shall we change the subject?"

"Well," said Annunziata, with an air of deliberation, "if you are perfectly sure I shall

not go to Hell, and that my Purgatory will not be long and hard, I think I will do what I said. I will lie down in the water and go to sleep, and the water will drown me, and I shall die."

Maria Dolores' face was terrified. "Annunziata!" she cried. "You don't know what you are saying. You are cruel. You won't do anything of the sort. You must give me your solemn word of honour that you won't do anything of the sort. It would be a most dreadful sin. Come. Come with me now, away from here, away from the sight of the river. You must never come here alone again. Give me your hand, and come away."

Annunziata got up, gave her hand, and moved off at Maria Dolores' side, towards the Castle. "Of course," she said, "if I want to die, I don't need to lie down in the water. I can die at any moment I wish, by just shutting my eyes, and holding my breath, and telling my heart seven times to stop beating. Heart, stop beating; heart, stop beating;—that way, seven times."

"For the love of Mercy," wailed poor Maria Dolores, almost writhing in her misery. . . . Then, suddenly, she breathed a deep sigh of

relief, and fervently exclaimed, "Thank God." John was advancing towards them, down the rugged pathway.

"Do please come and help me with this perverse and maddening child," she called to him, in English. "She's frightening me half out of my wits by threatening to die. She even threatened to drown herself in the Rampio."

"Children of her complexion can't die," said John, in Italian, (and Annunziata pricked up her ears). "They can only turn into monkeys, and then they have to live in the forests of Africa, where it is always dark, and all the men and women are negro savages, and all the other animals (except the mosquitos and the snakes) are lions and tigers. Besides, if Annunziata were to turn into a monkey, she couldn't have the sugared chestnuts that somebody or other has brought her from Roccadoro. On the chest of drawers in my room there has mysteriously appeared a box of sugared chestnuts. I thought they were for her, but they're not, unless she will promise never to turn into a monkey."

Annunziata's eyes had clouded.

"Of course I won't turn into a monkey," she said, in accents at once of disillusion and disdain. "I did not know there was any such danger. I should hate to be a monkey." Then her eyes brightened again. "May I go and get them now?" she asked, wistful and impatient.

"Yes," said John; "be off with you." And she went running lightly up the hill.

He turned to Maria Dolores. Her face (clear-cut, with its dark hair, against the red background of her sunshade) was white and drawn with pain. But she smiled, rather wanly, as her gaze met his, and said, in a weak voice, "Oh, I am so glad you came. I can't tell you how she was frightening me." And all at once her eyes filled with tears.

I needn't say whether John was moved, whether it was his impulse to take her in his arms and dry her tears with kisses. He did actually, on that impulse, give a perceptible start towards her, but then he restrained himself. "The child ought to be whipped," he broke out angrily. "You must not take her prattle so seriously."

"But *she* was so serious," said Maria Dolores.

"Oh, when she threatened to lie down in the river, and let herself be drowned—!" Her voice failed her, as at the inexpressible.

"No fear of that," said John. "The first touch of the cold water (and icy-cold it is, a glacier-stream, you know) would bring her to her senses. But come! You must not think of it any more. You have had a bad shock, but no bones are broken, and now you must try to banish it all from your mind."

"What an unaccountable child she is!" said Maria Dolores. "Surely it is unnatural and alarming for a child to have her head so teeming with strange freaks and fancies. Oh, I pray God to grant that nothing may happen to her."

"The most serious evil that's likely to happen to her for the present," said John, "will be an indigestion of marrons glacés."

Maria Dolores' tears had gone now. She smiled. But afterwards she looked grave again. "Oh, I wish I could get the dread of something happening to her out of my heart. I wish she wasn't so pale and fragile-looking," she said. Then there came a gleam in her eyes. "But you were going for a walk, and I am detaining you."

"The object of my walk has been accomplished," said John.

"Oh?" questioned she.

"I was walking in the hope, on the chance, that I might meet you," he hardily explained. "It's such an age since I've seen you. Are you making for the garden? I pray you to be kind, and let me go with you. I've been an exile and a wanderer—I've been to Roccadoro."

She had rebegun her ascension of the hill. The path was steep, as well as rugged. Sometimes John had to help her over a hard bit. The touch of her hand, soft and warm, and firm too, in his; the sense of her closeness; the faint fragrance of her garments, of her hair,—these things, you may be sure, went to his head, went to his heart. The garden lay in a white blaze of sunshine, that seemed almost material, like an incandescent fluid; but the entrance to the avenue was dark and inviting. "Let us," he proposed, "go and sit on a marble bench under the glossy leaves of the ilexes, in the deep, cool shade; and let's play that it's a thousand years ago, and that you're a Queen (white Queen Blanche, like a queen of lilies), and that I'm your minstrel-man."

"What song will you sing me?" asked she gaily, as they took their places on the marble bench. It was semicircular, with a high carved back, (carved with the armorials of the Sforzas), and of course it was lichen-stained, grey and blue and green, yellow and scarlet.

"*White Queen Blanche, like a queen of lilies,*
Fairer and dearer than dearest and fairest,
To hear me sing, if it her sweet will is,—
Sing, minstrel-man, of thy love, an thou darest,"

trolled John, in his light barytone, to a tune, I imagine, improvised for the occasion. "But if it's a thousand years ago," he laughed, "that song smacks too much perhaps of actuality, and I had best choose another."

Maria Dolores joined in his laugh. "I did not know you sang," she said. "Let me hear the other."

"A song," reflected he, "that I could sing with a good deal of feeling and conviction, would be 'Give her but the least excuse to love me.'"

Maria Dolores all at once looked sober.

"Oughtn't you to be careful," she said, "to give her no excuse at all to love you, if you

are really resolved never to ask her to be your wife?"

"That is exactly what I have given her," answered John, "no excuse at all. I should sing in a spirit purely academic,—my song would be the utterance of a pious but hopeless longing, of the moth's desire for the star."

"But she, I suppose, isn't a star," objected Maria Dolores. "She's probably just a weak human woman. You may have given her excuses without meaning to." There was the slightest quaver in her voice.

John caught his breath; he turned upon her almost violently. But she was facing away from him, down the avenue, so that he could not get her eyes.

"In that case," she said, "wouldn't you owe her something?"

"I should owe myself a lifetime's penance with the discipline," John on a solemn tone replied, hungrily looking at her cheek, at the little tendrils of dark hair about her brow. "God knows what I should owe to her."

"You would owe it to her," said Maria Dolores, always facing away, "to tell her your

love straightforwardly, and to ask her to marry you."

John thrilled, John ached. His blue eyes burned upon her. "What else do you think I dream of, night and day? But how could I, with honour? You know my poverty," he groaned.

"But if she has enough, more than enough, for two?" softly urged Maria Dolores.

"Ah, that's the worst of it," cried he. "If we were equals in penury, if she had nothing, then I might honourably ask her, and we could live on herbs together in a garret, and I could keep her respect and my own. Oh, garret-paradise! But to marry a woman who is rich, to live in luxury with her, and to try to look unconscious while she pays the bills,—she would despise me, I should abhor myself."

"Why should she despise you?" asked Maria Dolores. "The possession of wealth is a mere accident. If people are married and love each other, I can't see that it matters an atom whether their money belonged in the first place to the man or to the woman,—it would belong henceforward to them both equally."

"That is a very generous way of looking at it, but it is a woman's way. No decent man could accept it," said John.

"Up to a certain point," said Maria Dolores, slowly, "I understand your scruples. I understand that a poor man might feel that he would not like to make the advances, if the woman he loved was rich. But suppose the woman loved him, and knew that he loved her, and knew that it was only his poverty which held him back, then *she* might make the advances. She might put aside her pride, and go halfway to meet him, and to remove his difficulties and embarrassments. If, after that, he still did not ask her, I think his scruples would have become mere vanity,—I think it would show that he cared more for his mere vanity than for her happiness."

Her voice died out. John could see that her lip quivered a little. His throat was dry. The pulses were pounding in his temples. His brain was all a confusion. He hardly knew what had befallen him, he hardly knew what she had said. He only knew that there was a great ball of fire in his breast, and that the pain of it was half an immeasurable joy.

"God forgive me," the absurd and exaggerated stickler for the dignity of his sex wildly cried. "God knows how I love her, how I care for her happiness. But to go to her empty-handed,—but to put myself in the position of being kept by a woman,—God knows how impossible it is."

Maria Dolores stood up, still looking away from him.

"Well, let us hope," she said, changing her tone to one of unconcerned detachment, "that we have been discussing baseless suppositions. Let us hope that her heart is quite untouched. And for both your sakes," she concluded, her head in the air, "let us hope that you and she will never meet again. Good-bye."

She gave him a curt little nod, and walked lightly, rapidly up the avenue.

John's brain was all a confusion. He looked after her helplessly. He only knew that there was a great ball of fire in his breast, and that the pain of it was now unmixed.

V

Maria Dolores tripped into Frau Brandt's sitting-room, merrily singing a snatch of song.

"*Gardez vous d'être sévère*
Quand on vous parle d'amour,"

she carolled. Then she stopped singing, and blithely laughed.

Frau Brandt raised her good brown face from her knitting, and her good brown eyes looked anxiously upwards, slantwise over her tortoiseshell-rimmed spectacles.

"What is the matter now?" she asked. "What has happened to vex you now?"

"To vex me!" cried Maria Dolores, in apparent astonishment. "Wasn't I singing aloud from sheer exuberance of high spirits?"

"No," said Frau Brandt, with a very positive shake of her white-capped head. "You were

singing to conceal your low spirits. What has happened?"

"Ah, well, then, if you know so much and must know all," said Maria Dolores, "I've just proposed to the man I'm in love with, and been sent about my business."

"What do you mean?" asked Frau Brandt, phlegmatic. "What nonsense is this?"

"I mean my cobbler's son," Maria Dolores answered. "I, a Princess of the Empire, humbly offered him, a cobbler's son, my hand, heart, and fortune,—and the graceless man rejected them with scorn."

"That is a likely story," said Frau Brandt, wagging her chin. Her blunt brown fingers returned to their occupation. "I see your Serene Highness offering her hand."

"At all events, will you kindly tell Josephine to pack our boxes. To-morrow we'll be flitting," her Serene Highness in a casual way announced.

"What say you?" cried Frau Brandt, dropping her knitting into her lap.

"Yes—to Mischenau, to my brother," the Princess pursued. "Of course you'll have to come with us, poor dear. You can't let me travel alone with Josephine."

"No," said Frau Brandt. "I will go with you."

"And you can remain for my wedding," Maria Dolores added. "I am going home to meet my brother's wishes, and to marry my second cousin, the high and mighty Maximilian, Prince of Zelt-Zelt."

"Herr Gott!" said Frau Brandt, glancing with devotion at the ceiling.

VI

JOHN, wild-eyed, was still where she had left him, in the avenue, savouring and resavouring his woe. "If only," he brooded, "she were of one's own rank in the world, then her wealth might perhaps not be such an absolutely hopeless impediment as it is. But to marry, as they say, beneath one, and to marry money into the bargain,—that would be a little too much like the fortune-hunter of tradition." He still sat where she had left him, on the marble bench, disconsolate, when the parroco approached hurriedly, from the direction of the house.

"Signore," the parroco began, out of breath, "I offer a thousand excuses for venturing to disturb you, but my niece has suddenly fallen ill. I am going to the village to telephone for a doctor. My cook is away, for her Sunday afternoon. Might I pray you to have the extreme kindness to stay with the child till

I return? I don't know what is the matter, but she fainted, and now is delirious, and, I'm afraid, very ill indeed."

"Good Heavens!" gasped John, forgetting everything else. "Of course, of course."

And he set off hotfoot for the presbytery.

PART SIXTH

My Friend Prospero

I

I WOULD rather not dwell upon the details of Annunziata's illness. By the mercy of Providence, she got well in the end; but in the mean time those details were sufficiently painful. John, for example, found it more than painful to hear her cry out piteously, as she often would in her delirium, that she did not wish to be turned into a monkey; he hung his head and groaned, and cursed the malinspired moment which had given that chimæra birth. However, he had his compensations. Maria Dolores, whom he had thought never to see again, he saw every day. "Let us hope that you and she may never meet again." In his despairing heart the words became a refrain. But an hour later the news of trouble at the presbytery had travelled to the pavilion, and she flew straight to Annunziata's bedside. Ever since, (postponing those threatened nuptials at

Mischenau), she had shared with John, and the parroco, and Marcella the cook, the labours of nurse. And though it was arranged that the men, turn and turn about, should watch by night, and the women by day, John, by coming early and leaving late, contrived to make a good part of his vigil and of hers coincident. And the strange result is that now, looking backwards upon that period of pain and dread, when from minute to minute no one knew what awful change the next minute might bring,—looking backwards, and seeing again the small bare room, cell-like, with its white-washed walls, its iron cot, its Crucifix, its narrow window (through which wide miles of valley shone), and then the little white face and the brown curls tossing on the pillow, and the woman of his love sitting near to him, in the intimacy of a common care and common duties,—the strange result is that John feels a glow in his heart, as at the memory of a period of joy.

"Oh, do not let them turn me into a monkey. Oh, Holy Mother, I am so afraid. Oh, do not let them!" Annunziata cried, shuddering, and shrinking deeper into bed, towards the wall.

John hung his head and wrung his hands. "My God, my God!" he groaned.

"You should not blame yourself," Maria Dolores said in a low voice, while she bathed the child's forehead, and fanned her face. "Your intention was good, you could not foresee what has happened, and it may be for the best, after all,—it may strengthen her 'will to live,' which is the great thing, the doctor says."

She had spoken English, but Annunziata's next outcry was like a response.

"Oh, to live, to live—I want to live, to live! Oh, let me live!"

But at other times her wandering thoughts took quite a different turn.

Gazing solemnly up into Maria Dolores' face, she said, "He does not even know her name, though he fears it may be Smitti. I thought it was Maria Dolores, but he fears it may be Smitti."

John looked out of the window, pretending not to hear, and praying, I expect, that Maria Dolores' eyes might be blinded and her counsel darkened. At the same time, (Heaven having sent me a laughing hero), I won't vouch that his shoulders didn't shake a little.

II

Apropos of their ignorance of each other's patronymics . . . One afternoon Maria Dolores was taking the air at the open door of the presbytery, when, to a mighty clattering of horses' hoofs, a big high-swung barouche came sweeping into the court-yard, described a bold half-circle, and abruptly drew up before her. In the barouche sat a big old lady, a big soft, humorous-eyed old lady, in cool crêpe-de-chine, cream-coloured, with beautiful white hair, a very gay light straw bonnet, and a much befurbelowed lavender-hued sunshade. Coachman and footman, bolt upright, stared straight before them, as rigid as if their liveries were of papier-maché. The horses, with a full sense of what they owed to appearances, fierily champed their bits, tossed their manes, and pawed the paving-stones. The old lady smiled upon Maria Dolores with a look of great

friendliness and interest, softly bowed, and wished her, in a fine, warm, old high-bred voice, "Good afternoon."

Maria Dolores (feeling an instant liking, as well as curiosity and admiration) smiled in her turn, and responded, "Good afternoon."

"You enjoy a fine view from here," the old lady remarked, ducking her sunshade in the direction of the valley.

"A beautiful view," agreed Maria Dolores, following the sunshade with her eyes.

Those of the stranger had a gleam. "But don't you think, if the unvarnished truth may be whispered, that it's becoming the merest trifle too hot?" she suggested.

Maria Dolores lightly laughed. "I think it is decidedly too hot," she said.

"I'm glad to find we're of the same opinion," declared the old lady, fanning herself. "You can positively *see* the heat vibrating there in the distance. We children of the North should fly such weather. For my part, I'm off to-morrow for England, where I can shiver through the summer comfortably in my chimney-corner."

Maria Dolores laughed out again.

"So I've driven over from Roccadoro," the newcomer continued, "to have a farewell look at a young man of my acquaintance who's staying here. I dare say you may know him. He has blue eyes and a red beard, a flattering manner and a pretty wit, and his name is Blanchemain."

"Oh?" said Maria Dolores, her eyebrows going up. "Is that his name? You mean the young Englishman who lives with the parroco?"

The old lady's eyebrows, which were thick and dark, went up too.

"Is it possible you didn't know his name?" was her surprised ejaculation. Then she said, "I wonder whether he is anywhere about?"

"I fancy he's asleep," said Maria Dolores.

"Asleep? At this hour?" The dark eyebrows frowned their protest. "That sounds like a sad slugabed."

Maria Dolores looked serious. "He was up all night. We have a child ill here, and he was up all night, watching."

The stranger's grey eyes filled with concern and sympathy. "I hope, I'm sure, it's not

that pretty little girl, the niece of the parroco ?'' she said.

"Unhappily, it is," said Maria Dolores. "She has been very ill indeed."

"I am extremely sorry to hear it, extremely sorry," the old lady declared, with feeling. "If I can be of any sort of use—if I can send anything—or in any way help— " Her eyes completed the offer.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," replied Maria Dolores. "You are most kind, but I don't think there is anything any one can do. Besides, she is on the mend now, we hope. The doctor says the worst is probably over."

"Well, thank God for that," exclaimed the visitor, with a will. She considered for a moment, and then reverted to the previous question. "So you did not know that my vivid young friend's name was Blanchemain ?"

"No," said Maria Dolores.

"It is a good name—there's none better in England," averred the old lady, with a nod of emphasis that set the wheat-ears in her bonnet quivering.

"Oh—?" said Maria Dolores, looking politely interested.

"He's the nephew and heir of Lord Blanchemain of Ventmere," her instructress went on. "That is one of our most ancient peerages."

"Really?" said Maria Dolores. (What else did she say in her heart? Where now was her cobbler's son?)

"And I'm glad to be able to add that I'm his sort of connection—I'm the widow of the late Lord Blanchemain." The lady paused; then, with that smile of hers which we know, that smile which went as an advance-guard to disarm resentment, "People of my age are allowed to be inquisitive," she premised. "I have introduced myself to you—won't you introduce yourself to me?"

"My name is Maria Dolores of Zelt-Neuminster," answered the person questioned, also smiling.

The widow of the late Lord Blanchemain inwardly gasped, but she was quick to suppress all outward symptoms of that circumstance. The daughter of Eve in her gasped, but the practised old Englishwoman of the world affably and imperturbably pronounced, with a gracious movement of the head, "Ah, indeed? You are then, of course, a relation of the Prince?"

"I am the Prince's sister," said Maria Dolores. And, as if an explanation of her presence was in order, she added, "I am here visiting my old nurse and governess, to whom my brother has given a pavilion of the Castle for her home."

Lady Blanchemain fanned herself. "A miller's daughter!" she thought, with a silent laugh at John's expense and her own. "I am very glad to have made your acquaintance," she said, "and I hope this may not be our last meeting. I'm afraid I ought now to be hastening back to Roccadoro. I wonder whether you will have the kindness, when you see him, to convey my parting benediction to Mr. Blanchemain. Oh, no, I would not let him be wakened, not for worlds. Thank you. Good-bye."

And with a great effect of majesty and importance, like a conscious thing, her carriage rolled away.

III

"My romance is over, my April dream is ended," said the Princess, with an air, perhaps a feint, of listless melancholy, to Frau Brandt.

"What mean you?" asked Frau Brandt, unmoved.

"My cobbler's son has disappeared—has vanished in a blaze of glory," her Serene Highness explained, and laughed.

"I don't understand," said Frau Brandt. "He has not left Sant' Alessina?"

"No, but he isn't a cobbler's son at all—he's merely been masquerading as one—his name is not Brown, Jones, or Robinson—his name is the high-sounding name of Blanchemain, and he's heir to an English peerage."

"Ah, so? He is then noble?" Frau Brandt inferred, raising her eyes, with satisfaction.

"As noble as need be. An English peer is

marriageable. So here's adieu to my cottage in the air."

"Here's good riddance to it," said Frau Brandt.

That evening, at the hour of sunset, Maria Dolores met John in the garden.

"You had a visitor this afternoon," she announced. "A most inspiritingly young old lady, as soft and white as a powder-puff, in a carriage that was like a coach-and-four. Lady Blanchemain. She is leaving to-morrow for England. She desired me to give you her farewell blessing."

"It will be doubly precious to me by reason of the medium through which it comes," said John, with his courtliest obeisance.

There was a little pause, during which she looked at the western sky. But presently, "Why did you tell me you had an uncle who was a farmer?" she asked, beginning slowly to pace down the pathway.

"Did I tell you that? I suppose I had a boastful fit upon me," John replied.

"But it very much misled me," said Maria Dolores.

"Oh, it's perfectly true," said John.

"You are the heir to a peerage," said Maria Dolores.

John had a gesture.

"There you are," he said; "and my uncle, the peer, spends much of his time and most of his money breeding sheep and growing turnips. If that isn't a farmer, I should like to know what is."

"I hope you displayed less reticence regarding your station in the world to that woman you were in love with," said she.

"That woman I *was* in love with?" John caught her up. "That woman I *am* in love with, please."

"Oh? Are you still in love with her?" Maria Dolores wondered. "It is so long since you have spoken of her, I thought your heart was healed."

"If I have not spoken of her, it has been because I was under the impression that you had tacitly forbidden me to do so," John informed her.

"So I had," she admitted. "But I find that there is such a thing—as being too well obeyed."

She brought out her last words, after the

briefest possible suspension, hurriedly, in a voice that quailed a little, as if in terror of its own audacity. John, with tingling pulses, turned upon her. But she, according to her habit at such times, refused him her eyes. He could see, though, that her eyelashes trembled.

"Oh," he cried, "I love her so much, I need her so, I suppose I shall end by doing the dishonourable thing."

"Did you ever tell her that you were Lord Blanchemain's heir?" she asked.

"I never thought of it. Why should I?" said John.

"When you were bemoaning your poverty, as an obstacle to marriage, you might have remembered that your birth counted for something. With us Austrians, for example, birth counts for almost everything,—for infinitely more than money."

"I think," said John, as one impersonally generalizing, "that a fortune-hunter with a tuft is the least admirable variety of that animal. I wish you could see what beautiful little rose-white ears she has, and the lovely way in which her dark hair droops about them."

"How long ago was it," mused she, "that

love first made people fancy they saw beauties which had no real existence?"

"Oh, the moment you see a thing, it acquires real existence," John returned. "The act of seeing is an act of creation. The thing you see has real existence on your retina and in your mind, if nowhere else, and that is the realest sort of real existence."

"Then she must thank you as the creator of her 'rose-white' ears," laughed Maria Dolores. "I wonder whether that sunset has any real existence, and whether it is really as splendid as it seems."

The west had become a vast sea of gold, a pure and placid sea of many-tinted gold, bounded and intersected and broken into innumerable wide bays and narrow inlets by great cloud-promontories, purple and rose and umber. Directly opposite, just above the crest-line of the hills, hung the nearly full moon, pale as a mere phantom of itself. And from somewhere in the boscage at the garden's end came a lool-lool-lool-lioo-liô, deep and long-drawn, liquid and complaining, which one knew to be the preliminary piping-up of Philomel.

"If some things," said John, "derive their

beauty from the eye of the beholder, the beauty of other things is determined by the presence or absence of the person you long to share all beautiful visions with. The sky, the clouds, the whole air and earth, this evening, seem to me beauty in its ultimate perfection."

Maria Dolores softly laughed, softly, softly. And for a long time, by the marble balustrade that guarded this particular terrace of the garden, they stood in silence. The western gold burned to red, and more sombre red ; the cloud-promontories gloomed purpler ; the pale moon kindled, and shone like ice afire, with its intense cold brilliancy ; the olive woods against the sky lay black ; a score of nightingales, near and far, were calling and sobbing and exulting ; and two human spirits yearned with the mystery of love.

"My income," said John, all at once, brusquely coming to earth, "is exactly six hundred pounds a year. I suppose two people *could* live on that, though I'm dashed if I see how. Of course we couldn't live in England, where that infernal future peerage would put us under a thousand obligations ; but I dare say we might find a garret here in Italy. The

question is, would she be willing, or have I any right to ask her, to marry me, on the condition of leaving her own money untouched, and living with me on mine?"

"Apropos of future peerages and things," said Maria Dolores, "do you happen to know whether she has any rank of her own to keep up?"

"I don't care twopence about her rank," said John.

"Do you happen to know her name?" she asked.

"I know what I wish her name was," John promptly answered. "I wish to Heaven it was Blanchemain."

Maria Dolores gazed, pensive, at the moon. "He does not even know her name," she remarked, on a key of meditation, "though he fears," she sadly shook her head, "he fears it may be Smitti."

"Oh, I say!" cried John, wincing, with a kind of sorry giggle; and I don't know whether he looked or felt the more sheepish. His face showed every signal of humiliation, he tugged nervously at his beard, but his eyes, in spite of him, his very blue blue eyes were full of vexed amusement.

The bell in the clock-tower struck eight.

"There—it is your hour for going to Annunziata," said Maria Dolores.

"You have not answered my question?" said John.

"I will think about it," said she.

IV

Annunziata's delirium had passed, but in spite of all their efforts to persuade her not to talk, talk she would.

"This is the month of May, isn't it?" she asked, next morning.

"Yes, dear one," said Maria Dolores, whose watch it was.

"And that is the month of Mary. San Luca ought to hurry up and make me well, so that I can keep flowers on the Lady Altar."

"Then if you wish to get well quickly," said Maria Dolores, "you must try not to talk,—nor even to think, if you can help it. You know the doctor does not want you to talk."

"All right. I won't talk. A going clock may be always wrong, but a stopped clock is right twice a day. So stop your tongue, and avoid folly. My uncle told me that. He never talks."

"And now shall you and I imitate his

example ?" proposed Maria Dolores. Her lips, compressed, were plainly the gaolers of a laugh.

"Yes," said Annunziata. "But I can't help thinking of those poor flowers. All May flowers are born to be put on the Lady Altar. Those poor flowers are missing what they were born for. They must be very sad."

"This afternoon, every afternoon," Maria Dolores promised, "I will put flowers on the Lady Altar. Now see if you can't shut your eyes, and rest for a little while."

"I once found a toad on the Lady Altar. What do you think he was there for ?" asked Annunziata.

"I can't think, I'm sure," said Maria Dolores.

"Well, when I first saw him I was angry, and I was going to get a broom and sweep him away. But then I thought it must be very hard to be a toad, and that you can't help being a toad if you are born one, and I thought that perhaps that toad was there praying that he might be changed from a toad to something else. So I didn't sweep him away. Have you ever heard of the little Mass of Corruption that lay in a garden ?"

"No," said Maria Dolores.

"Well," said Annunziata, "once upon a time a little Mass of Corruption lay in a garden. But it did not know it was a Mass of Corruption, and it did not wish to be a Mass of Corruption, and it never did any harm or wished any harm to any one, but just lay there all day long, and thought how beautiful the sky was, and how good and warm the sun, and how sweet the flowers were and the bird-songs, and thanked God with all its heart for having given it such a lovely place to lie in. Yet all the while, you know, it couldn't help being what it was, a little Mass of Corruption. And at the close of the day some people who were walking in the garden saw it, and cried out, 'Oh, what a horrible little Mass of Corruption!' and they called the gardener, and had it buried in the earth. But the little Mass of Corruption, when it heard that it *was* a little Mass of Corruption, felt very, very sad, and it made a supplication to Our Lady. 'I do not wish to be a Mass of Corruption,' it said. 'Queen of Heaven, pray for me, that I may be purified, and made clean, and not be a Mass of Corruption any longer, and that I may then go

back to the garden, out of this dark earth.' So Our Lady prayed for it, and it was cleansed with water and purified, and—what do you think the Little Mass of Corruption became? It became a rose—a red rose in that very garden, just where they had buried it. From which we see— But I don't quite remember what we see from it," she broke off, the pain of baffled effort on her brow. "My uncle could tell you that."

Afterwards, for a few minutes, she was silent, lying quite still, with her eyes on the ceiling.

"Why do sunny lands produce dark people, and dark lands light people?" she asked all at once.

"Ah, don't begin to talk again, dear," Maria Dolores pleaded. "The doctor will be coming soon now, and he will be angry if he finds that I have let you talk."

"Oh, I will tell him that it isn't your fault," said Annunziata. "I will tell him that you didn't let me, but that I talked because it is so hard to lie here and think, think, think, and not be allowed to say what you are thinking Prospero asked me that question about sunny lands a long time ago. I've been thinking and

thinking, but I can't think it out. Have you a great deal of money? Are you very rich?"

"Darling, won't you please not talk any more?" Maria Dolores implored her.

"I'll stop pretty soon," said Annunziata. "I think you are very rich. I think, in spite of his saying her name is not Maria Dolores, that you are the dark woman whom Prospero is to marry. He is to marry a dark woman who will be very rich. But then he will also be very rich himself. Is Austria a sunny land? England must be a dark land, for Prospero is light. Let me see your left hand, please, and I will tell you whether you are to marry a light man."

"Hush!" said Maria Dolores, trying not to laugh. "That shall be some other time."

"Wouldn't you like to marry Prospero? I would," said Annunziata.

"I think I hear the wheels of the doctor's gig," said Maria Dolores. "Now we shall both be scolded."

"But of course, if you do marry him, I can't," Annunziata pursued, undaunted by this menace. "A man isn't allowed to have two wives,—unless he is a king. He may have two

sisters or two daughters, but not two wives or two mothers. There was once a king named Salomone who had a thousand wives, but even he had only one mother, I think. I hope you will live at Sant' Alessina after your marriage. Will you ?"

Maria Dolores bit her lip and vouchsafed no answer ; and again for a minute or two Annunziata lay silent. But presently, "Have you ever waked up in the middle of the night, and felt terribly frightened ?" she asked.

"Yes, dear, sometimes. I suppose every one has," said Maria Dolores.

"Well, do you know why people feel so frightened when they wake like that ?" pursued the child.

"No," said Maria Dolores.

"I do," said Annunziata. "The middle of the night is the Devil's Noon. Nobody is awake in the middle of the night except wicked people, like thieves or roysterers, or people who are suffering. All people who are good, and who are well and happy, are sound asleep. So it is the time the Devil likes best, and he and all his evil spirits come to the earth to enjoy the great pleasure of seeing people wicked

or suffering. And that is why we feel so frightened when we wake. The air all round us is full of evil spirits, though we can't see them, and they are watching us, to run and tell the Devil if we do anything wicked or suffer any pain. But it is foolish of us to feel frightened, because our Guardian Angels are always there too, and they are a hundred times stronger than the evil spirits. Angels, you know, are very big, very much bigger than men. Some of them are as tall as mountains, but even the quite small ones are as tall as trees."

"This time I really do hear wheels," said Maria Dolores, with an accent of thanksgiving.

And she rose to meet the doctor.

V

JOHN sat in his room, absorbed in contemplation of a tiny lace-edged pocket-handkerchief. He spread it out upon his knee, and laughed. He crumpled it up in his palm, and pressed it to his face, and drank deep of its faint perfume,—faint, but powerfully provocative of visions and emotions. He had found it during the night on the floor of the sick-room, and had captured and borne it away like a treasure. He spread it out on his knee again, and was again about to laugh at its small size and gauzy texture, when his eye was caught by something in its corner. He held it nearer to the window. The thing that had caught his eye was a cypher surmounted by a crown, embroidered so minutely as almost to call for a magnifying glass. But without a glass he could see that the cypher was composed of the initials M and D, and that the

crown was not a coronet, but a closed crown, of the pattern worn by mediatised princes.

"What on earth can be the meaning of this?" he wondered, frowning, and breathing quick.

But he was stopped from further speculation for the moment by a knock at the door. The postman entered with two letters, for one of which, as it was registered, John had to sign. When he had tipped the postman and was alone again, he put his registered letter on the dressing-table (with a view to disciplining curiosity and exercising patience, possibly) and turned his attention to the other. In a handsome, high old hand, that somehow reminded him of the writer's voice, it ran as follows :—

"DEAR JOHN,

"I was heart-broken not to see you when I drove over to say good-bye this afternoon, but chance favoured me at least to the extent of letting me see your miller's daughter, and you may believe that I was glad of an opportunity to inspect her at close quarters. My dear boy, she is no more a miller's daughter than you are. Her beauty—there's *race* in it.

Her manner and carriage, her voice, accent, her way of dressing, (I'd give a sovereign for the name of her dressmaker), the fineness of her skin, her hair, everything—there's race in 'em all, race and consciousness of race, pride, dignity, distinction. These things don't come to pass in a generation. I'm surprised at your lack of perspicacity. And those blue eyes of yours look so sharp, too. But perhaps your wish was father to your thought. You felt (well, and so to some extent did I) that it would be more *romantic*. She's probably a very great swell indeed, and I expect the Frau What's-her-name she's staying with will turn out to be her old governess or nurse or something. When those Austrians *can* show quarterings, (of course you must bar recent creations—they're generally named Cohen), they can show them to some effect. They think nothing of thirty-two. All of which, *au fond*, rather rejoices me, for if she really had been a miller's daughter, it would have seemed a good deal like throwing yourself away, and who knows what your rusty, crusty old uncle B. might have said? I've long had a rod in pickle for *him*, and t'other day I applied it. *Attendez.*

"Don't forget the pig you purchased—so gallantly and confidingly. I would not to the marriage of true minds admit impediments—your pig will gobble 'em up. You should by this have received a communication from my solicitors. Remember, you have pledged your sacred promise. There must be no question of trying to shirk or burke it. Remember that I am quite outrageously rich. I have no children of my own, and no very near relatives, (and my distant ones are intensely disagreeable), and I can't help looking upon the heir of the Blanchemains as a kind of spiritual son. In your position there's no such thing as having too much money. Take all that comes, and never mind the quarter whence. They're Plymouth Brethren, and send me tracts.

"Good-bye now till August, if not before. For of course in August you must come to me at Fring. Will you bring your bride? When and where the wedding? I suppose they'll want it in Austria. Beware of long engagements—or of too short ones. The autumn's the time,—the only pretty ring-time. You see, you'll need some months for the preparation of your trousseau. I love a man to be smart.

Well, good-bye. I was so sorry about that child's illness, but thankful to hear she was mending.

"Yours affectionately,

"LINDA BLANCHEMAIN."

And his registered letter, when at last he opened it, ran thus :—

"DEAR SIR :—Pursuant to instructions received from our client Lady Blanchemain, we beg to hand you herewith our cheque for Seven hundred and fifty pounds (£750 stg.), and to request the favour of your receipt for the same, together with the address of your bankers, that we may pay in quarterly a like sum to your account, it being her ladyship's intention, immediately upon her return to England, to effect a settlement upon yourself and heirs of £100,000 funded in Bk. of Eng. stock.

"We are further to have the pleasure to inform you that by the terms of a will just prepared by us, and to be executed by Lady Blanchemain at the earliest possible date, you are constituted her residuary legatee.

"With compliments and respectful congratulations,

"We have the honour, dear Sir, to be,

"Your obedient servants,

"FARROW, BERNSCOT, AND TISDALE."

And then there came another tap at the door, and it was the postman who had returned, with a third letter which, like the true Italian postman that he was, he had forgotten,—and I fancy, if it hadn't been for that tip still warm in his pocket, the easy-going fellow would have allowed it to stand over till to-morrow. He made, at any rate, a great virtue of having discovered it and of having retraced his steps.

The letter was written in black, angular, uncompromising characters, that looked rather like sabre-thrusts and bayonets. It read :—

"DEAR JACK :—I have received the enclosure from Linda Lady Blanchemain. She is an exceedingly impertinent and meddlesome old woman. But she is right about the allowance. I don't know why I never thought of it myself. I don't know why you never suggested it. I extremely regret it. As next in succession, you

are certainly entitled to an annuity from the estate. I have to-day remitted £500 to your bankers, and am instructing my agents to pay in a like amount quarterly.

"I hope I shall soon be seeing you at Ventmere. We are having a grand lambing season, but there's a nasty spread of swine-fever, and the whole country's papered with handbills. I got a goodish bit of hunting down at Wilsborough during the winter. Now there's nothing to do but play golf. I never could find any fun in shooting rooks.

"Your affectionate uncle,

"B of V."

And the enclosure :—

"Linda Lady Blanchemain presents her compliments to Lord Blanchemain of Ventmere, and begs to apprise him that she has lately had the pleasure of meeting his lordship's nephew John, and has discovered to her amazement that his lordship makes him no allowance. This situation, for the heir to the barony of Blanchemain, is of course absurd, and must, Lady Blanchemain is sure, be due entirely to an

oversight on his lordship's part. She ventures, therefore, with all respect, to bring it to his notice."

So! Here sat a young man with plenty to think about; a young man, whose income, yesterday a bare six hundred, had sprung up over night to something near six thousand. Six thousand a year isn't opulence, if you like, but a young man possessing it can hardly look upon himself as quite empty-handed, either. This young man, however, had other things as well to think of. What of that embroidered handkerchief? What of those shrewd suspicions of Lady Blanchemain's? What of his miller's daughter?

And there was another thing still. What of his proud old honest Spartan of an unimaginative uncle? He thought of him, and "Oh, the poor old boy," he cried. "Not for ten times the money would I have had the dear old woman write to him like that. How hard it must have hit him!"

"M, D, and a princely crown," he reflected. "I wish I had an Almanach de Gotha."

VI

"Who was it said of some one that he dearly loved a lord?" Maria Dolores, her chin in the air, asked of Frau Brandt.

"I do not know," Frau Brandt replied, knitting.

"Well, at least, you know whether it would be possible for a man and wife to live luxuriously on sixpence a week. Would it?" pursued her tease.

"You are well aware that it would not," said Frau Brandt.

"How about six hundred pounds a year?"

"Six hundred pounds—?" Frau Brandt computed. "That would be six thousand florins, no? It would depend upon their station in the world."

"Well, suppose their station were about my station—and my lord's?"

"You," said Frau Brandt, with a chuckle of

contentment, swaying her white-bonneted head. "You would need twice that for your dress alone."

"One could dress more simply," said Maria Dolores.

"No," said Frau Brandt, her good eyes beaming, "you must always dress in the very finest that can be had."

"But then," Maria Dolores asked with wistfulness, "what am I to do? For six hundred pounds is the total of his income."

"You have, unless I am mistaken, an income of your own," Frau Brandt remarked.

"Yes—but he won't let me use it," said Maria Dolores.

"He? Who?" demanded Frau Brandt, bridling. "Who is there that dares to say let or not let to you?"

"My future husband," said Maria Dolores. "He has peculiar ideas of honour. He does not like the notion of marrying a woman who is richer than himself. So he will marry me only on the condition that I send my own fortune to be dropped in the middle of the sea."

"What nonsense is this?" said Frau Brandt, composed.

"No, it is the truth," said Maria Dolores, "the true truth. He is too proud to live in luxury at his wife's expense."

"I like a man making conditions, when it is a question of marrying *you*," said Frau Brandt, with scorn.

"So do I," said Maria Dolores, with heartiness.

"Well, at any rate, I am glad to see that he is not after you for your money," Frau Brandt reflected.

"I suppose we shall have to dress in sackcloth and dine on lentils," said Maria Dolores.

"Of course you will tell him to take his conditions to the Old One," said Frau Brandt. "It is out of the question for you to change the manner of your life."

"I feel indeed as if it were," admitted Maria Dolores. "But if he insists?"

"Then tell him to go to the Old One himself," was Frau Brandt's blunt advice.

Maria Dolores laughed. "It seems like an *impasse*," she said. "Who is to break the news to my brother?"

"We will wait until there is some news to break," the old woman amiably grumbled.

Again at the sunset hour Maria Dolores met him in the garden. He was seated on one of their marble benches, amongst marble columns, (rose-tinted by the western light, and casting long purple shadows), in a vine-embowered pergola. He was leaning forward, legs crossed, brow wrinkled, as one deep in thought. But of course at the sound of her footstep he jumped up.

"What mighty problem were you revolving?" she asked. "You looked like Rembrandt's *philosophe en méditation.*"

"I was revolving the problem of human love," he answered. "I was mutilating Browning.

'Was it something said,
Something done,
Was it touch of hand,
Turn of head?'

I was also thinking about you. I was wondering whether it would be my cruel destiny not to see you this evening, and thinking of the first time I ever saw you."

"Oh," said she, lightly, "that morning among the olives,—when you gathered the windflowers for me?"

"No," said he. "That was the second time."

"Indeed?" said she, surprised. She sat down on the marble bench. John stood before her.

"Yes," said he. "The first time was the day before. You were crossing the garden—you were bending over the sun-dial—and I spied upon you from a window of the *piano nobile*. Lady Blanchemain was there with me, and she made a prediction."

"What did she predict?" asked Maria Dolores, unsuspicious.

"She predicted that I would fall—" But he dropped his sentence in the middle. "She predicted what has happened."

"Oh," murmured Maria Dolores, and looked at the horizon. By-and-by, "That morning among the olives was the first time that I saw you—when you dashed like a paladin to my assistance. I feel that I have never sufficiently thanked you."

"A paladin oddly panoplied," said John. "Tell me honestly, weren't you in two minds whether or not to reward me with largesse? You had silver in your hand."

Maria Dolores laughed. I think she coloured a little.

"Perhaps I was, for half a second," she confessed. "But your grand manner soon put me in one mind."

John also laughed. He took a turn backwards and forwards. "I have waked in the dead of night, and grown hot and cold to remember the figure of fun I was."

"No," said Maria Dolores, to console him. "You weren't a figure of fun. Your costume had the air of being an impromptu, but," she laughed, "your native dignity shone through."

"Thank you," said John, bowing. "The next time I saw you was that same afternoon. You were with Annunziata in the avenue. I carried my vision of you, like a melody, all the way to Roccadoro—and all the way home again."

"I had just made Annunziata's acquaintance," said Maria Dolores.

"You had a white sunshade and a lilac frock," said John. "The next time was that night in the moonlight. You were all in white, with a scarf of white lace over your

hair. You threw me a white rose from your balcony—and I have carried that rose with me ever since."

"I threw you a white rose?" doubted Maria Dolores, looking up, at fault.

"Yes," said John. "Have you forgotten it?"

"I certainly have," said she, with emphasis.

"You threw me a smile that was like a white rose," said he.

She laughed.

"I think I just distantly acknowledged your bow," she said.

"Well, some people's distant acknowledgments are like white roses," said he. "I hope, at least, you remember what a glorious night it was, and how the nightingales were singing?"

"Yes," said she. "I remember that."

"I have a fancy," he declared, "that it will be a more glorious night still to-night, and that the nightingales will sing better than they have ever sung before."

Maria Dolores did not speak.

"Do you happen," John asked, after a long silence, while they gazed at the deepening

colours in the west, "do you happen to possess such a thing as a copy of the Almanach de Gotha?"

"Yes," said she.

"Really? I wonder whether you will lend it to me?"

"I am sorry—it is in Vienna." And after an instant's pause, she ventured, "What, if it isn't indiscreet to inquire, do you wish to look up?"

"I wish to look up a lady—a dream lady—a lady who walks in beauty like the night of cloudless climes—and whose pocket-handkerchiefs are embroidered with the initials M. D., in a cypher, under a princely crown."

"I should think," said Maria Dolores, considering, "that she would probably be a member of one of the mediatised princely houses. But if you have nothing more than her initials to go by, you would find it difficult to trace her in the Almanach de Gotha."

"No doubt," said John. "But to a man of spirit a difficulty is a challenge."

"Do you make a practice," asked she, "of appropriating people's handkerchiefs?"

"Certain people's—yes," unblushing, he promptly owned.

"M. D. under a princely crown, I think you said?" she mused. "It occurs to me that Maria Dolores of Zelt-Neuminster's pocket-handkerchiefs might be so embroidered."

"Ah?" said John. "Zelt-Neuminster? That would be a daughter of the man who owns this Castle?"

"No, she is a sister of the man who owns this Castle."

"I understand," said John. "I wonder that the sister of the man who owns this Castle never comes here to see how fine it is."

"She has been here quite recently," said Maria Dolores. "She has been here visiting her foster-mother, who lives in the pavilion beyond the clock. She came to make a sort of retreat—to think something over."

"Yes—?" questioned he.

"Her brother is very anxious to marry her off. He is anxious that she should marry her second cousin, the Prince of Zelt-Zelt. She came here to make up her mind."

"Has she made it up?" he asked.

"I am not sure," said she.

"Yet you seem to be deep in her confidence," said he.

"Yes—but she is not quite sure herself."

"Oh—?" said John.

"She is one of those foolish women who dream of marriage as a high romance."

"Wise men," said John, "dream of it as the highest."

She shook her head.

"A marriage with her cousin would be an end to all romance for ever. She was thinking a little while ago, I believe, of marrying a plain commoner, the nephew of a farmer. That would have been indeed romantic. Now, I hear, she is considering a future member of your English House of Lords."

"Wouldn't even that be rather romantic—if a step down constitutes romance?" John suggested.

"Oh, a British peer is scarcely a step down," she returned. "Besides, there are people who don't care—what is the expression?—twopence about rank."

"When I said that," John explained, "I had no inkling that her rank was so exalted."

"Did you think she was the daughter of a cobbler?" Maria Dolores quickly, with some haughtiness, inquired.

"I thought she was a daughter of the stars," John answered.

"And you feared her name was Smitti," she said, haughtiness dissolving in mirth. "I will never tell you what she feared that yours was."

"See," said John, "how they are hanging the heavens with banners. It must be in honour of some great impending event."

Yesterday the west had been a sea. To-day it was a city, a vast grey and violet city, with palaces and battlemented towers, and countless airy spires and pinnacles; and here, there, everywhere, its walls were gay with gold and crimson, as with drooping banners.

"'Tis a city *en fête*," said John. "'Tis the city where marriages are made. They must have one in hand."

"Hark," said she, putting up a finger. "There are your nightingales beginning."

But the raised finger reminded him of something. "Have you a rooted objection to rings?" he asked.

"Why?" asked she.

"I notice that you don't wear any."

"Oh, sometimes I wear many," she said.

"Then one has moods in which one leaves them off."

"I have a ring in my pocket which I think belongs to you," said he.

"Really? I don't know that any of my rings are missing."

"Here it is," said he. He produced the little old shagreen case he had received from Lady Blanchemain, opened, and offered it.

"It is a singularly beautiful ring," said she, her eyes admiring. "But it doesn't belong to me."

"I think it does," said he. "May I try it on your finger?"

She put forth her right hand.

"No—your left hand, please," he said. He dropped upon one knee before her, and when the delicate white hand was surrendered, I imagine he made of getting the ring upon the alliance finger a longer business by a good deal than was necessary. "There," he said in the end, "you see. It looks as if it had grown there. Of course it belongs to you." He still held her hand, warm and firm and velvet-soft. I think in another second he would have touched it with his lips. But she drew it away.

She gazed into the depths of the heart-shaped ruby, tremulous with liquid light, and smiled as at secret thoughts.

"But I don't see," said John, getting to his feet, "how any man can ask a Princess of the House of Zelt to marry him and live on six hundred pounds a year."

"She would have to modify her habits a good deal, that is very certain," said Maria Dolores.

"She would have to modify them utterly," said John. "Six hundred a year is poverty even for a single man. For a married couple it would be beggary. She would have to live like the wife of a petty employé. She would have to travel second class and stay at fourth-rate hotels. She would have to turn her old dresses and trim her own bonnets. She would have to do without a maid. And all this means that she would have virtually to renounce her caste, to give up the society of her equals, who demand a certain scale of appearances, and to live among pariahs or to live in isolation. Don't you think a man would be a monster of selfishness to exact such sacrifices?"

"Oh, some men have excessively far-fetched and morbid notions of honour," said she.

"Do you think the Princess, with all this brought to her attention, would ever dream of consenting?"

"Women in love are weak—they will consent to almost anything," said she, her dark eyes smiling for an instant into his.

Why didn't he take her in his arms? Hope deferred maketh the heart sick, but to defer the consummation of a joy assured (observes the Persian poet) giveth the heart a peculiar sweet excitement.

"Well," said John. "I'm glad to think she is weak; but I'll never ask my wife to consent to anything so unpleasant. A Princess and a future peeress, living on six hundred pounds a year! It's unheard of."

She looked at him, puzzled, incredulous.

"Oh—? Can you possibly mean—that you will—take back your condition?"

"Yes," said he, humbly. "Who am I to make conditions?"

"You will let her spend as much of her own money as she likes?" she wondered, wide-eyed.

"As a lover of thrift, I shall deprecate

extravagance," said John. "But as a submissive husband, I shall let her do in all things as her fancy dictates."

"Well," marvelled she, "here is a surprise—here is a volte-face indeed."

And she looked at the city in the sky, and appeared to turn things over.

John was mysteriously chuckling.

"Haven't you your opinion," he asked, "of men who eat their words and put their scruples in their pockets?"

"I don't understand," said she, looking wild. "There is, of course, some joke."

"There is a joke, indeed," said he; "the joke is that I'm ten times richer than I told you I was."

She started back, and fixed him with a glance.

"Then all that about your being poor was only humbug?" There was reproach in her voice, I'm not sure there wasn't disappointment.

"No," said he, "it was the exact and literal truth. But I have come into a modest competency over-night."

"I don't understand," said she.

"My own part in the story is a sufficiently

inglorious one," said he. "I'm the benefactee. Lady Blanchemain and my uncle have put their heads together, and endowed me. I feel rather small at letting them, but it enables me to look my affianced boldly in the money-eye."

"Oh? You are affianced? Already?" she asked gaily.

"No—not unless you are," gaily answered John.

She looked down at her ring.

VII

THE quiet-coloured end of evening smiled fainter, fainter. The aerial city, its cloud-capped towers and gorgeous palaces, had crumbled into ruins, and stars twinkled among their shattered and darkened walls. The moon burned icily above the eastern hills. The nightingales (or John was no true prophet) sang better than they had ever sung before, while bats, hither, thither, flew in startling zig-zags, as if waltzing to the music. And all the air was sweet with the breath of dew-wet roses.

The clock struck eight.

"There—you must go," said Maria Dolores.

"Go? Where to?" asked John, feigning vagueness.

"This is no subject for jest," said she, feigning severity.

"I can't go yet—I can't leave you yet," said

he. "Besides, it is an education in æsthetics to watch the moonlight on these marble columns, and the pale shadows of the vine-leaves."

"Well, then," said she, "stay you here and pursue your education. I will go in your place. For Marcella Cuciniera must be relieved." She rose, and moved towards the darkling front of the Castle.

"Hang education! I'll go with you," said John, following.

"I shall only stop a moment, to see how she is," said Maria Dolores. "Then I must hurry home, to get my packing begun."

"Your packing?" faltered John.

"To-morrow morning Frau Brandt and I are leaving for Austria—for Schloss Mischenau, where my brother lives."

"Good Lord!" said John. "Ah, well, I suppose it is what they would call the proper course," he admitted with gloomy resignation. "But think how dreadfully you'll be missed—by Annunziata."

"Annunziata is so much better, I can easily be spared," said Maria Dolores; "and anyhow —'tis needs must. I think you will probably soon receive a letter from my brother, asking

you to visit him. Mischenau is a place worth seeing, in its northern style. And, in his northern style, my brother is a man worth meeting. I counsel you to go."

"I shall certainly go," said John. "I shall linger here at Sant' Alessina like a soul in durance, counting the hours till my release. I shall be particularly glad to meet your brother, as I have matters of importance to arrange with him."

"Until then," said she, smiling, "I think we must do with those—matters of importance"—her voice quavered on the word—"what is it that the Pope sometimes does with Cardinals?"

"Yes," moodily consented John, "I suppose we must. But oh me, what a dreary, blank, stale, and unprofitable desolation this garden will become,—and at every turn the ghost of some past joy!"

Annunziata looked up with eyes that seemed omniscient.

"I was thinking about you," she greeted them.

"About which of us?" asked John.

"About both of you. I always now, since a long while, think of you both together. I think Maria Dolores is the dark woman whom Prospero is to marry."

John laughed. Maria Dolores looked out of the window.

"And I was thinking," Annunziata went on, "how strange it was that if you hadn't both at the same time just happened to come to Sant' Alessina, you might have lived and died and never have known each other."

"Perish that thought," laughed John. "But I have sometimes thought it myself."

"And then," Annunziata rounded out her tale, "I thought that perhaps you had not just happened—that probably you had been led."

"That is a thing I haven't a doubt of," John with energy affirmed.

"You look as if you were very glad about something—both of you," said Annunziata, those omniscient eyes of hers studying their faces. "What is it that you are both so glad of?"

"We are so glad to find you feeling so well," answered Maria Dolores.

But Annunziata shook her head, as one who knew better. "No—that is not the only thing. You are glad of something else besides."

"There's no taking you in," said John.

"But we are under bonds to treat that Something Else as the Pope sometimes treats Princes of the Church."

"He gives them red hats," said Annunziata.

"I shall give this thing a crown of myrtle," said John.

"You sometimes say things that sound as if they hadn't any sense," Annunziata informed him, with patient indulgence, nodding at the ceiling.

Maria Dolores leaned over the bed, and kissed Annunziata's brow. "Good night, carina," she murmured.

Annunziata put up her little white arms, and encircled Maria Dolores' neck. Then she kissed her four times—on the brow, on the chin, on the left cheek, on the right. "That is a cross of kisses," she explained. "It is the way my mother used to kiss me. It means may the four Angels of Peace, Grace, Holiness, and Wisdom watch over your sleep."

But early next morning, John being still on duty, Maria Dolores came back,—booted and spurred for her journey, in tailor-made tweeds, with a little felt toque and a veil: a costume of

which Annunziata's eyes were quick to catch the suggestion.

"Why are you dressed like that?" she asked, uneasily. "I never saw you dressed like that before. You look as if you were going away somewhere."

"I have got to go away—I have got to go to my home, in Austria. I have come to bid you good-bye," Maria Dolores answered.

Annunziata's eyes were dark with pain. "Oh," she said, in a voice of deep dismay.

"We shan't be separated long, though," Maria Dolores promised. "I have asked your uncle to lend you to me. As soon as you are strong enough to travel, you are coming to Austria to pay me a long visit. Then I will come back with you to Sant' Alessina. And then—well, wherever I go you will always go with me. For of course I can never live happily again without you."

"One moment, please," put in John. "Here is a small difficulty. I can never live happily without her, either. I also have asked her uncle to lend her to me. And wherever *I* go, she is always to go with me. How are we to adjust our rival claims?"

Annunziata's eyes lighted up.

"Oh, that will be easy enough," she pointed out. "You will have to go everywhere together."

THE END

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